Altair and Vega

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Altair and Vega

by kooprdoodl

Summary

Will once wondered if they could survive separation. Now, when he turns to face what lies beyond, he sees—as does Hannibal—a warning inscribed in the passing constellations:

Altair, Vega, and the river between them.

Sequel to Golden Hour, in which shortly after their escape from the US, a $50 million bounty is posted with the following conditions:

Will Graham — Dead or Alive

Hannibal Lecter — Dead

Notes

Since this picks up right where we left off, I recommend reading the previous fic before starting.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

The Promise

Chapter Notes

Previously on *Wrath on the Lam*…

"Hello, *Lester*…"

"Mr. Cunningham, are we already on a *first* name basis?"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's 7:30 PM.

I'm in Havana, Cuba.

And thanks to this little shit…

……my name is Gil Cunningham.

When Will picked up the menu, he noticed how Hannibal's eyes first flicked to the tan line encircling Will's left ring finger.

"Glad your priorities are in order," he mutters.

Hannibal grins as his focus returns to his own menu. "I admit, I had doubts you'd escape that endeavor without a scratch. …Or worse."

They're seated at the far corner of the restaurant's rooftop balcony—Will dressed sharply in a gray suit and open-collar dress shirt, and Hannibal in immaculate "black tie" attire. The clamor of the other patrons, mostly tourists, effectively drowns out their words from any prying ears.

Although the sky is still bright out, the sun is already half-obscured by the jagged skyline of multi-colored buildings. The already illuminated bistro lights sway gently in the humid breeze, which sends ripples through the white tablecloths and threatens to whisk away any un-anchored napkins.

A waitress introduces herself in English, but Hannibal effortlessly orders their drinks in Spanish. Will sighs upon hearing the request for water, yet he puts on a polite smile when she

returns with his glass. Hannibal, of course, ordered himself some sort of top-dollar wine.

“Well…” Will begins, pausing to sip from his iced water. He anticipates being freed from his medication-induced prohibition by the end of the week, in addition to making good on the promised celebration. Most importantly, he intends to get Hannibal drunk this time around. “Evidently, I found someone with *steady hands* and *lots* of *experience*.”

Hannibal microscopically quirks his brow at that. Will waits for a witty remark. Yet when he gets nothing but weighted silence, he folds up his menu and sits back with a sigh.

“Ok, what’s going on?” he asks, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Hannibal feigns being occupied with his menu. “With what?”

Will rubs at his tired eyes. “I don’t know, Han*cock*, you tell me.”

And like the absolute child that he is, Hannibal can’t contain his smirk. But he quickly puts on an air of stoicism the next second.

“Well, Mr. Cunningham,” he says, finally setting aside his menu, “I’ll have you know I’m always on the lookout for fitting aliases.” He breathes in the aroma of his wine before taking a sip. “And this particular name was simply one I hadn’t used yet.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

Appearing quite pleased with himself, Hannibal briefly dips his chin. “Thank you for the suggestion.”

The waitress returns to take their orders and collect their menus. By now, the sun has completely vanished behind the buildings, leaving a purple sky of scattered peach-tinged clouds. Will observes in silence and, for a moment, relives last evening’s shared memories aboard the yacht. To Will in particular, he sees the genuine, profound wonder that was etched onto Hannibal’s face.

An innocence—incongruous yet endearing.

“Going straight for the entrée tonight, are we?” Will notes, eyes still on the darkening skyline. Someone else with an optimal view would be enjoying the green flash right about now.

…or facing away and taking it for granted, as Will had done for years.

“With luck, we’ll have more opportunities to try their other dishes.” Hannibal subtly shifts into a more tense posture in his seat—an act which doesn’t go unnoticed by Will. “For now, I find it imperative that we get to the…heart of the matter.”

Will gives Hannibal an unamused look. “Which is…?”

“Something we’ll discuss after dinner,” he answers too quickly.

Eyes on the tiny wavering candle at the center of their table, Will sighs. In theory, he can easily bust down these cardboard mental barriers Hannibal has put up over his side of their memory palace. But after twelve hours of nonstop on-the-lam errands, while also navigating through a newly healed gunshot wound, Will simply can't be bothered.

It seems Hannibal was banking on this as well.

Will finishes the last of his water with a sigh. "So much for finding *nourishment* at the very *sight* of me…" Glancing away, he scoffs. "I was wondering when you'd start getting antsy."

Gaze fixed on the struggling candle between them, Hannibal works his jaw for a moment. Then he begins carefully, "As you're already aware, we are on a trajectory that is leading—and *has* led us—toward what is new territory for me as well."

Will's mind immediately jumps to all the possible conclusions this could be leading to, but he keeps quiet.

Hannibal takes a breath. "Consequently, I've found myself dwelling on 'time' as of late, including the passage of it, its ephemeral nature, and what that entails for—"

Just then, their waitress returns with two steaming plates. Although Will wants to throttle Hannibal for stalling, he nods in thanks to the waitress and immediately digs into his grilled lobster and risotto.

While his meal seems to be cooked to decadent perfection and practically melts in his mouth, Will can't help but feel uneasy with the uncanny situation they've found themselves in.

They're eating at a restaurant.

Hannibal Lecter is eating at a restaurant.

Will lifts his gaze and sure enough, Hannibal is gracefully partaking in his dish of octopus ceviche. Most astounding is how he's seemingly *not* offended by the taste or plating.

At first, Will assumed this was all part of their "disguise." But something else is at play here, nagging at him from the back of his mind.

They finish their dinner in tense silence.

As the twilight hour comes to an end, the rooftop becomes fully cast in the warm lighting of the crisscrossing bistro lights. A random assortment of illuminated windows dot the surrounding view, the sky above darkening and blending with the building's silhouettes.

As Will leans back into his chair with his arms crossed, Hannibal takes his sweet time setting aside his utensils and wiping his hands on his napkin.

Finally, his mouth parts. "As I was saying, I found myself intrigued by the ephemeral nature of time, our evolving perception of its passage, its—"

"*Just cut to the chase*," Will snaps. But he instantly regrets it upon sensing the genuine anxiety exuding from the older man. Sighing, Will rubs at his forehead and gently adds, "Please."

Eyes flicking from Will, to the table, and back again, Hannibal swallows. "In an ideal world, we would have the means and luxury to plan every moment to perfection."

"Well, I think we already covered what kind of world *I* think this is."

Hannibal nods once. "And I agree with you."

Will pauses. "So…"

"*So,*" Hannibal says, hands clasped and leaning his forearms on the table. "While I'm aware that this is the best we can manage at the moment, I also realize this is far from the most opportune time and place for such an occasion, yet… And yet……"

Then, with a heavy sigh, Hannibal reaches into his coat pocket.

And pulls out a small box.

…

…

…

……oh.

Will slowly puts a hand to his mouth.

That possibility hadn't occurred to him.

Somehow.

"I look forward to dinner," Hannibal had said after their morning goodbye. On his face was a fond, eager smile.

"Then it's a date?"

"It can be."

Heart thundering in his ears, Will can no longer hear the raucous chatter of other customers or the jazzy piano music being piped in through the speakers.

They might as well be in their own world.

We can be…

Sound fizzles out. Their surroundings blend horizontally until they're encased by four walls, a ceiling, and a vision conceived over half a century ago.

Will blinks and finds himself seated on the center of a bench.

Before him looms Botticelli's *Primavera.*

And in the air echoes a promise.

…to always remember this time.

Here and *only* here, Hannibal is kneeling.

They appear as they were that day—battered, bruised, and with mirrored scabs upon their faces. For a long moment, Will merely stares, taking in the odd sight of the humbled, cannibalistic serial killer and the platinum ring nestled within the open box—a vision from another world.

In the still air around them echoes the yet unanswered question:

"Do you ache for him?"

Do I…?

…….for me?

As the low timbre of Hannibal's voice fades into the heavy silence, Will sighs and lifts his focus to stare directly into Hannibal's eyes.

Then he calls forth that memory from so long ago.

—of them seated in his office at 7:30 PM.

Hannibal in his dark suit, Will in his plaid flannel, and a bottle of pink wine to be shared between them.

When posed the question, he immediately gave Hannibal a wry smile.

And perhaps a part of him always knew, even then.

Yes, I think is the answer to that.

Hannibal's eyes widen ever so slightly.

"Well," Will at last remarks, "guess that explains why you wanted my wedding ring gone… *today.*"

Relief eases some of the tension in Hannibal's shoulders. He grins. "And why I'm glad whoever did the honors *also* didn't sever your finger along with it."

“I’m sure you could’ve sewed it back on.”

Smirking, Hannibal stares with a devious glint in his shadowed eyes. “I regret to inform you that I’m far more adept at removing parts than reconnecting them.”

Will laughs. “Just put the *damn* thing on before I change my mind!”

Knowing better than to risk *not* taking that threat seriously, Hannibal immediately jumps up and takes Will’s left hand. The ring slips on with ease.

A perfect fit.

—which surprises Will, considering how he fully expected the “permanent” size of his old one.

Hannibal certainly wouldn’t have been above that.

“True,” he admits, effectively disrupting Will’s inner musings. “But I figured there may be times when it needs to be removed for practical reasons.”

“How thoughtful of you.”

With a flash of teeth in his grin, Hannibal pockets the empty box and seats himself to Will’s left.

All the while, Will admires the glossy silver hue that gleams in the dim light like an unmarred blade. The thin ring has a sleek, flat profile with a curved line etched into the infinitely looping surface.

“Why’s the upper edge uneven?” Will asks, running his right thumb and index finger over it.

“It’s part of a set.”

After a pause, Will scoffs. He had considered getting a bridal ring set for Molly, but she had practical tastes and insisted that she would hardly ever wear her engagement ring.

It was a very short engagement anyway.

“So this is just half of it, then,” Will notes.

“Yes.”

“Fancy.”

Brimming with pride, Hannibal grins.

Will huffs as he abruptly recalls being chased around that snow-dusted RV. “No wonder you were so upset that day. Never would’ve guessed marriage meant that much to you.”

Focus aptly on Venus, Hannibal nods. “Marriage was one of many things I never considered…before……”

Will smirks. “Before…*us*?”

“Similar to how Abigail opened my eyes to the appeal of fatherhood, I suddenly desired for our connection to have permanence.”

“‘*Suddenly*’?” Amused, Will wrinkles his brow. “How long have you been wanting to propose?”

But eyes downcast, Hannibal doesn’t answer.

Will’s smile disappears.

Then the epiphany strikes him when, in a blink, he sees that blood-soaked kitchen, the anguish in Hannibal’s closed face…

The broken heart.

The breath catches in Will’s throat. “*That* night—?”

It hits them all at once, projecting across the vast walls and reverberating down the halls of their palace:

An imago is an image of a loved one…

His fate was sealed the moment he—this imitation—dared to cross my path.

Buried in the unconscious, carried with us all our lives…

I splintered every bone, fractured them dynamically, made him malleable…

I have a concept of you, just as you have a concept of me.

This is my design.

You’re family, Will.

A valentine written on a broken man.

Three reversed swords through an upright heart.

Lowering his head, Hannibal sighs. “Because…despite all our tribulations and trespasses, I still hoped we could try again.”

Will studies each of the gracefully painted figures—the passage of spring to the promise of summer. “And we did.”

Hannibal follows Will’s line of sight. Then he places his right hand over Will’s left and, with a soft smile, leans in close. “And so, we did.”

Feeling the warm breaths brush across his parted lips, Will closes his eyes as Hannibal kisses him—gentle and fleeting.

When they part, the murky ambient noise gradually sharpens to a staccato of clinking silverware and overlapping conversations. A jazz band is performing on the opposite end of the dining area.

Will opens his eyes. Their plates and utensils are gone. All that remains is the candle, its tiny flame still clinging to life.

“I already took care of the bill,” Hannibal says as he removes his hand from Will’s.

With the immense weight of the day suddenly bearing down on his shoulders, Will slouches deep into his chair and yawns. “Time to call it a night?”

Reflecting his weariness in the sharp creases beneath his eyes, Hannibal nods. After stiffly rising to their feet, they maneuver through the narrow lanes between tables and chairs.

But as they scale down the staircase, their waitress happens to pass by. From a few steps above, she pauses to give Hannibal an inquiring look, to which he replies with a wink and quick glance toward Will’s left hand. She gasps and rushes upstairs to break the news.

Many bets were won and lost that night.

Hannibal catches up to Will, who is waiting on the sidewalk just outside.

“What’s with all the commotion?” he asks as they begin to walk side-by-side down the street.

Hannibal shrugs. “Perhaps their team scored.”

Will narrows his eyes but doesn’t pry further. Then he sighs. “So…is this gonna be a shotgun wedding or what?”

Hannibal smirks. “Seeing as how we’ve already had a dress rehearsal in our palace foyer, I figured we could allow ourselves a *little* time for planning.”

Will laughs. “I knew you couldn’t resist. You already have a date in mind?”

On a vacant corner, Hannibal pauses and glances up at the night sky. Curious, Will looks up as well. The light pollution obscures most of the stars, but he can make out just a few flickering specks.

“July 7th.”

Will blinks, wondering for a split second if he had hallucinated Hannibal’s response. He glares at him incredulously, but Hannibal merely continues on without a word.

“…Wait.” Will tries to catch up, but a stabbing pain in the scar tissue of his left leg puts a stop to that. He winces and limps after him. “You *do* realize it’s still winter, *right*?”

Hannibal chuckles. “Impatient, are we?”

Will rolls his eyes as he stubbornly struggles to keep up. "*Well*, it's less a matter of *patience* and more a question of not *dying*—"

Suddenly, Hannibal stops and reaches his right arm across Will's back to pull him close. Will flinches at the firm touch, but he hooks his arm over Hannibal's shoulders and gratefully leans into his side.

With Hannibal as his crutch, they cross the final few blocks to the hotel.

A few days later

From over a thousand miles north, Jack grabs his coat and strolls down the hallway. Shoes squeaking on polished tile, various agents sprint past him as news of the faked radio transmission spreads like wildfire.

Before long, reporters will be blocking all exits and clamoring for answers. He's at least glad he won't be dealing with that particular headache anymore.

But now he finds himself at a crossroad.

"You need to cut that part out of you," she had warned.

Even while languishing on Death's door, mind clouded by cruel illness and a cocktail of drugs, she was right.

…because here it is again.

That unease.

The unsettling sensation that comes with daring to ignore an addiction.

An obsession.

Now completely unmoored from the FBI, the gates to that all-consuming madness stand wide open and *beckon* him to—once again—step through.

…and then what?

"I don't want to kill you anymore, Jack."

Don't make me want to, was the threat between the lines.

In *his* eyes.

Jack once mocked Will for being unable to pull the trigger. But as he lay alone in the hospital room—as Will once did—waiting for time to heal the severed flesh in his shoulder, he finally came to terms with his own hypocrisy.

When the moment comes…

……will you do what needs to be done?

Outside, Jack pulls out his phone and makes the call. The tone drones in his ear twice, and then—

"Alana?"

"What happened?" is her grim voice, scarcely a whisper.

Eyes closed, Jack takes a deep breath.

"They're alive."

Chapter End Notes

And so begins Hancock and Cunningham's journey into the great beyond.

All or Nothing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Life on the run is…strange, to say the least.

Will had a taste of it during their RV road-trip. Thanks to his insider knowledge of FBI techniques, he was already well-versed in the art of muddying his money trail, avoiding surveillance cameras, swapping disguises, preventing cellphone pings, and disappearing in blindspots. However, now that Hannibal was out and about, they couldn't risk being seen together on the regular.

This also meant that their nights were spent apart. While Will not only lay in a separate hotel room but also a different part of town, he stared at the ceiling for hours, wondering if he could somehow encounter Hannibal in their "shared" rooms.

But he never did.

Will would run himself ragged searching every dizzying memory palace corridor until he essentially passed out from exhaustion.

And so, their sporadic "dates" served as invaluable checkpoints.

Sometimes it was dinner. Sometimes it was lunch. Each time, they would meet up at different restaurants, cafes, and even parks.

Regardless, they always made it a point to arrive *exactly* on time.

Within a minute.

Sometimes down to the second.

This insane punctuality wasn't something they agreed upon; it just…happened. Arriving too early meant an unbearably nerve-racking wait, while running *late* was completely inconceivable.

All too soon, their meals were finished. They would say their curt goodbyes, fully aware it could be their last, and then the vicious cycle would repeat.

On the worst nights, Will braced for a future in which Hannibal simply disappeared. Will would wait at their promised location, like a hapless dog at a train station, and never know if Hannibal had been killed or abandoned him.

He didn't know which fate he feared most.

It took every ounce of mental fortitude *not* to make that emergency call to Hannibal's burner phone. Needless to say, those were the nights when he would close his eyes yet linger in jittery consciousness all the way 'til daybreak.

Their third Friday in Cuba was one such night.

And like salt on the wound, their scheduled meet-up was set for the evening.

Will stumbled through his errands in zombie-like fashion. Despite the almost painful fatigue, he still kept up with his usual precautions. Eventually, the hours ticked by until—*finally*—Will found himself hurrying toward the restaurant's double doors.

Inside, his eyes instantly landed on a man in a dark blue suit. Standing with his back to the door, the man was in the middle of requesting a table for two. Grasped in his left hand was a briefcase.

7:29:55

Unsurprisingly, it was a busy night. The man's voice was lost amid the jumbled layers of conversations.

7:29:56

But Will could recognize the stark profile of those cheekbones from a mile away.

7:29:57

He'd only taken a single step when the man paused to subtly lift his chin.

7:29:58

Same atrocious aftershave.

7:29:59

Hands in his pockets, Will stopped beside him.

7:30:00

"Hello…" *Hannibal.*

"Hello." *Will.*

Too his amusement, Will realizes that Hannibal appears about as worn out as he is. Yet simply being in each other's presence is enough to breathe new life into their weary souls. Their waning posture straightens ever so slightly, and their drawn faces subtly ease into their comfortable, exclusive familiarity.

After a fleeting grin, Will sighs and rubs the back of his neck. "Hey, so uh… I've actually been feeling better lately. Think this calls for a *slight* change of plans."

Hannibal briefly lifts his brow in mock curiosity. “Are you sure?” His eyes flick to Will’s left leg for a millisecond. “Our table should be available in ten minutes.”

Will shifts his weight to his left foot. “I’m sure.”

Then, with a smile that seems wider than it actually is, Hannibal nods. “Very well.” He glances toward the exit. “Shall we?”

And, unable to resist, Will answers, “After you.”

The cork pops in time with the jazzy trumpet hit. With every window and sliding door thrown wide open—except for the screens to keep the bugs out—the pleasant sea breeze flows freely through every room and hall of the beachside house.

It’s the first night of Spring.

After all the hotel and motel hopping, they once again have ample room to breathe, stretch their limbs, and blast all the music they please.

Barely a minute after first tossing down his backpack, Will spotted the intriguing relic by the far side of the living room. It had caught his eye while browsing the photo galleries of rentals in Hannibal’s chosen locale.

A record player.

Sure enough, the cabinet below contained stacks of vinyl records.

Now, as Sinatra belts—in a rather upbeat manner—why half a love never appealed to him, Will joins Hannibal at the mini bar. Already a bit tipsy after their first round, he has to catch himself on the countertop’s edge, lest he go tumbling off the barstool.

Hannibal pauses mid-pour until he’s sure Will has stabilized himself. All the while, Will watches the dark swirl seep through the crushed ice and linger above the bright orange layer below. Hannibal garnishes the top with a sprig of mint, slice of lime, and wedge of pineapple. Then he reaches beneath the counter and draws out a pink umbrella toothpick, which he skewers into the pineapple.

With an eager grin, Will pulls the aesthetic drink to his lips and takes a tentative sip of his Mai Tai.

“Oh, *wow*,” he blurts with a scrunched brow, “*I mean*, I’m not the biggest fan of rum, but…” As if he needs a reminder, he takes another sip. “Now *that’s* tropical.”

Hannibal smirks as he retrieves his wine glass and returns to one of the upholstered living room chairs. “I should hope so.”

Will swivels around and leans an elbow on the counter. “Ok, be honest, have you *ever* hollowed out someone’s skull before?”

“Perhaps.” As Hannibal takes in the fragrance of his wine—its bottle a value of nearly five grand, courtesy of those two ill-fated, yet tasty, vloggers—he recalls Will’s post-mortem intentions for him and, for a moment, wonders if he would fancy doing the same. Of course, what deters him is his sentiment towards his fiancé’s flesh, so he’d likely opt to let nature take its course and retrieve the skull later. Then, he supposes he’d craft a special carrying case for it, place it on the mantle while he reads or composes music, perhaps talk to it, sleep with it…

“*Hah*, I knew it.”

Hannibal stills. At first, he’s in denial. But all he has to do is glance up at that all *too* amused look on Will’s face.

With a sigh, he closes his memory palace door on Will, who had been cheekily observing that entire train of thought from their shared corridor.

Normally, it’s Will who carelessly lays all his thoughts bare for Hannibal to see. This is the first time Hannibal has slipped up in that regard.

An irritating consequence of increased alcohol consumption, no doubt.

While swirling his wine glass, Hannibal decides to detract from this oversight by doing what he does best—flirtatiously changing the subject.

He licks his lips. “Any luck on your hunt for Bedelia?”

Will scoffs but accepts the feeble diversion. Hannibal is already teetering on the brink of intoxication—a rare gift he’s exclusively entrusting to Will. So, after taking another swig of his Mai Tai, he remarks, “Yes and no.”

Hannibal lifts his brow.

Will narrows his eyes. “Hey, considering how you *completely* lost track of her, I’m doing a pretty good job.”

“On the contrary, I didn’t lose track of her and instead chose not to pursue her—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Will mutters, picking up the umbrella toothpick. He uses his teeth to pluck off the pineapple wedge and chews as Hannibal sulks.

Then Will hops off the barstool and saunters over to switch off the record player. Half-empty Mai Tai in hand, he reclines into the corner of the couch and sighs. “Y’know, what *I* don’t understand is…how long have you been wanting to eat her?”

Hannibal hovers the opening of his glass over his mouth and nose. “…Jealous?”

Will smirks while trying to sneer.

Hannibal chuckles. “By making herself conspicuous, she had been sabotaging me for quite some time. But I suppose I knew for certain when she claimed to be ‘observing’ while she

was, in fact, 'participating.'"

"Guess she didn't have your appetite."

"No…" Hannibal agrees. He pauses to contemplate his now empty wine glass before adding, "And yet she once ate over *thirty* oysters in one sitting."

Will laughs.

But Hannibal's face remains grim as he recalls that time. He startled himself as much as Bedelia when he drove that ice pick into Sogliato's temple. Nor did he put any care or discretion into the murder of Antony Dimmond. As the bludgeoned Will-lookalike desperately dragged himself to the front door, Hannibal noted with apathy all the blood soaking through the hardwood floor. He mopped it up with only soap and a few towels. He even returned the knives to the kitchen once he had finished skinning the body. His DNA and fingerprints were everywhere.

None of that mattered.

He wanted to be seen.

Again.

"I do enjoy your company," Hannibal murmurs, barely audible.

Will looks away. "I know," he answers softly. He finishes the last of his drink and fiddles with the leftover ice for a long moment. Then he sets it aside and reaches for the garish wine bottle and his as-yet unused wine glass. Hannibal holds out his glass as well.

After Will refills it, Hannibal leans back into his chair and says, "For a time, I wondered what my life would've been like, had we never met…or had you not existed. But I've found that I can no longer fathom it."

"Well, *I* can," Will remarks. "You'd still be whispering through the chrysalides of your murderous patients, throwing pretentious high-society dinner parties, crying at operas, ripping rude pigs apart in sounders of three, and then serving them to your guests whenever you're feeling 'punny.'"

Hannibal makes the faintest of smiles. "Yet upon fleeing to Europe, I realized I could no longer recapture the passion I once had for that sort of life, try as I might."

Slouched deep into the far corner of the couch, Will scoffs. "Glad to know you weren't having *fun* while I was lying around *half-dead* and *comatose*."

Hannibal fidgets with the stem of his glass. "I knew you wouldn't die."

"'*Knew*' or '*refused* to believe'?" Will snaps as Hannibal keeps his own eyes averted. Will takes a gulp of his wine. "As you're already aware, they put me on a colostomy bag."

"They shouldn't have. I didn't—"

“They realized that later…” Will chuckles dryly. “Turns out, not *all* doctors are as competent as you! It’s a miracle I didn’t have any other complications.”

Speechless, Hannibal finishes his wine in uneasy silence. After adding a new name to the forefront of his mental Rolodex, he reaches over to refill his glass.

Will drops his head atop the backrest and gazes at the ceiling. “A shame we can’t control with respect to whom we fall in love.”

While continuing to drink, Hannibal shamelessly fixates on Will’s exposed throat. “Yes…”

Will smirks. “If we could, who would you have chosen?”

“Besides you?”

“Would you have *always* chosen me?”

“If not you, then no one.”

“So…your*self*, you narcissist.”

Hannibal grins. “If it weren’t for your beauty, perhaps I, too, would have gone my entire life staring at my own reflection.”

Will sits up with a smug grin. “Did you just admit that I’m *sexier* than you?”

But this time, Hannibal doesn’t sigh or scowl. He merely looks on with half-lidded eyes and smiles with jagged teeth. “You’re *beautiful*.”

A bit taken aback, Will glances over at the wine bottle. They had started with a sampling of some very exorbitant bourbon, though Will stopped early when he became preoccupied with sifting through the records. Then Hannibal helped himself to the wine until the playing of “Blue Hawaii” spurred him to make a Mai Tai. He wonders if Hannibal may have also sneaked a taste of the rum.

It came as no surprise that Hannibal’s high alcohol tolerance would match Will’s own. Yet Will half-expected that this god-among-men wouldn’t even have a limit.

With amused curiosity, Will turns back to him. “Go on…”

“I’ve seen and studied many subjects in my time.”

“So you’re saying you’ve slept around a lot.”

“—men, women…it doesn’t matter. You are *divine*. It’s not enough to draw or paint. I long to eternalize you in marble, as Michelangelo did to his David.”

“I’d hope with a bigger—”

“But your *mind*. From the moment I first laid eyes in you, I saw that exquisite darkness buried deep beneath your mirror neurons—a blue diamond in the rough. Pure empathy. Dazzling, brilliant, and reflecting back at me, I saw myself in you.”

Will scoffs. “…I’m sure you still do.”

After a pause, Hannibal sets his jaw and shifts his focus back to him. “I look forward to sharing a room again.”

“Yeah—”

“I’d like to sleep with you.”

The words hang in the humid air.

Will sips his wine instead of acknowledging that.

Through the haze of intoxication, Hannibal observes him longingly. After receiving nothing but silence, he drops his gaze to the dark hardwood floor between them. It might as well be a chasm.

“Why, Will?”

“Why what?”

“Although I don’t profess to know all, I am aware of your proclivities.”

Will exhales slowly. He aggressively avoids eye contact.

Taken aback, Hannibal tries to soften his voice. “I just want you to know that it doesn’t have to be difficult with us—”

“*Everything* is difficult with us.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Will absentmindedly taps the edge of his empty glass to his lower lip. Then he reaches over to pour the last bit of wine for himself.

The corner of Hannibal’s mouth briefly twitches into a dry grin as he sets aside his empty glass. “Are you perhaps waiting for marriage?”

“Never stopped me before.”

“And yet, are you?”

Will sighs. He sits back down and drinks.

“I simply desire to be intimate with you—”

“I know.”

"—in as many ways as we can. While we can."

Will furrows his brow. "*Why* are you saying it like that?" He rubs at his temples, afraid to ask with the evidence mounting, but he forces it out anyway. "What's wrong with you? Are you *dying*?"

"Only as much as you are."

"Then *what*?"

Hannibal parts his mouth yet hesitates. Then he abruptly stands, wobbling in the process, and stumbles down the hallway.

Upon hearing the bathroom door close, Will rolls his eyes. After finishing his wine, he sets his glass down on the coffee table and reaches for his burner phone. With the VPN activated, he searches for Molly's profile.

There's a new post from two days ago. Featured front-and-center in the thumbnail is Winston.

He immediately hits play.

Molly is filming. They're in the living room. Winston is sitting in front of the TV with a treat balanced on his nose. Will grins, already knowing what's about to happen. She tells Winston to wait, and he does.

For five seconds.

Then he does what he does best and tilts his head, causing the treat to slip off. Right before it hits the ground, a blur of white zooms in out of nowhere as Buster catches the treat and dashes away. The video ends in the middle of Molly shrieking, "*No*!" while Winston stares at Buster with an aghast, betrayed expression.

Will chuckles and plays it again.

On the third rewatch, he finally notices that the TV is on in the background.

The volume is low and the screen is slightly out of focus. Yet he can still make out the reporter's words and the bold text on the sensationalized graphics.

As intended.

Will closes the video and pockets the phone. Behind him, Hannibal stands slumped against the wall at the entrance to the hallway, where he's been for the past minute.

Will sits with his hands clasped and elbows leaning on his knees. "How long have you known?" he murmurs.

"The story only became public on Wednesday, but I've long assumed that Alana and Margot would resort to this." Hannibal smirks inwardly. "Technically, it worked the first time, though now the requirement is my death instead of my capture."

“That’s not what upsets me.”

Hannibal watches Will clumsily rise, using the couch’s backrest for support, and take their used cups to the sink. As Will rinses them, Hannibal meanders over. Sidling up behind him, he firmly links his forearms over Will’s stomach and rests the side of his chin against his shoulder.

Will tenses.

For a few frantic seconds, his mind instinctively wants to pull away. Yet when his brain finally sends the signal, the rest of his body refuses to obey.

Like the new ship of Theseus, the part of him that would have fled no longer exists—lost to the sea yet first replaced when he had that fated revelation on the blood-soaked cliff.

When he held him well and confessed his deepest truth.

—a desire requited.

And so, while sighing through his nose, he subtly leans back into Hannibal’s embrace and the warm haze of intoxication.

“Don’t they know?” Will asks, voice soft. He shuts off the faucet and dries his hands on the dish towel. “We’re conjoined. Can’t just kill *you*…”

Reveling in this now rare moment of intimacy, Hannibal nuzzles the side of Will’s neck and breathes in the heady scent of alcohol. “All or nothing?”

Will closes his eyes and places his left hand over Hannibal’s, who smiles with teeth upon feeling the ring.

His ring.

Will huffs and, with a wry grin, says:

“…or nothing at all.”

Chapter End Notes

If it’s love, there ain’t no in-between.

Truth and All Its Consequences

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In a blindingly white room rests a mummified man. The motorized bed is bent at an incline at the middle. In the distance, a helicopter turbine winds down to idle, though its steady thundering can still be heard through the walls.

Then the door opens, and the clicking of high heels stroll across the tiled floor to the awaiting chair beside the bed. As soon as the nurse leaves the room, Alana nods to her bodyguards, who step into the hallway and close the door behind them.

Alone at last, she reclines into the chair. Upon her lap is a lush bouquet of flowers—its cheerful colors in stark contrast to the soulless interior design and her monochrome-striped blazer and crimson blouse. She places the bouquet on the nightstand. “So, you called?”

The man encased in white bandages shifts slightly before opening his eyes. From beneath layers of gauze, his jaw flexes. “…how?”

Alana waits. But when he doesn’t continue, she sighs. “I’m afraid you’re gonna have to give me a bit more than that, Frederick.”

“How…is this allowed?”

“Well, it helps to be far from the only one who wants him dead.” She purses her lips. “*Needs* him dead.”

“You think…he’ll be caught…a second time?”

“He’s not going to be *caught*. We’re taking no prisoners.”

“Except for Will.”

Alana averts her eyes. “Perhaps.”

“He’ll kill you…in *his* place.” Chilton tsks while glacially shaking his head. “Why risk it?”

She pauses to take a deep breath. “Three years ago, I struck a deal with the Devil. In exchange for freeing him from a fate worse than death, I had him promise me that he’d save Will and—” She pauses upon recalling Chilton’s knack for hidden mics and mutters, “…a few other things.”

“And has Will Graham been…saved?”

In a riveting montage, Alana revisits that daring last stand of theirs, as documented by the news helicopters. They worked in perfect tandem, dispelling her last shrivel of a doubt that Will had been kidnapped. Then, when Will was shot, Hannibal risked everything to double back around for him.

No promises needed there.

In the time since their second disappearance, she finally forced herself to interpret the evidence. After a few phone calls and underhanded payments, she received a nondescript manila envelope. Inside were the grisly crime scene photos of Dolarhyde's murder. On an SD card was the digitized footage from his camera.

She'll never forget that never-before-seen imploring look in Hannibal's face, followed by an abrupt flinch as his wrathful eyes tracked the offscreen struggle. His upper lip twitched into a snarl. Fresh blood spewed from his wound when he shrugged off his blazer. He nearly slipped on his own blood while rising to his feet.

Photos of their scarlet footprints spelled out the sequence of their dance—lions circling before the death blow. As the Dragon finally spread his crimson wings, the two reconvened and stood face-to-face.

This is where their journey ended—at the edge of the cliff.

Or so it should have.

"Will is no longer the dear friend I once knew," Alana answers gravely. "Yet that doesn't change the fact that he once was."

"And…Hannibal?"

"The Hannibal I *thought* I knew never existed in the first place. That's the difference."

"I think you're…mistaken."

With a heavy sigh, she crosses her arms. "Did you *really* just invite me here for a chat? To show off your new lips?"

Chilton wheezes out a laugh. "The fact that you're *here* says…a *lot."*

"I suppose it would."

"Then where…?"

"Cuba."

Chilton blinks twice. Then he works his jaw, as if contemplating.

"It's unlikely they'll risk another trip at sea, or even a flight out, for the foreseeable future," she adds. "They're trapped on that island. It's just a matter of finding out where."

“And you’re relying on just…*anyone*?”

She shrugs. “I don’t see why not. People have done a lot more for a lot less.”

“Yet the amateurs would just be…*cannon fodder*... Practice for them to hone their craft.”

“Or it’ll wear them down.” She glances toward the shuttered window. Blinding light seeps through the hairline gaps. “It’ll be weeks on end of random attacks. Every little thing will make them jump.”

“But they won’t die from a thousand cuts. You’ll need…the coup de grâce.”

Alana raises an eyebrow. “And who would be so fortunate to get the honor?”

Chilton’s jaw shifts and his eyes narrow. “Your goals and mine…are one and the same. *Kill* Hannibal…and take ‘care’ of Will.” He inhales sharply. “I can help, but I’m afraid you’ll have to make another bargain.”

Alana briefly smirks. “Considering your state, I’m assuming you have someone in mind?”

“His track record…is very good…” he says almost playfully.

Running low on patience, she crosses her arms and sighs. “Alright, let’s hear it.”

Chilton slowly turns his head and stares at her with his one functioning eye. Then his chest rises as he takes a sharp, shuddering breath.

“Release the *hawk* from his *cage*.”

Will gasps.

After a long moment of staring in confusion at the bedroom ceiling fan, his heart abruptly flies back into a panic and he turns to his left.

Eyes closed, Hannibal is there, lying on his side, hair in disarray and arms askew.

No blood.

Still breathing.

Will rotates onto his back as the adrenaline ebbs. After his thundering heart fades to a quieter rhythm, his mouth perks into a crooked, giddy smile.

If there was ever a perfect time to kill them, last night would’ve been it.

Just like old times at the RV, Will had draped Hannibal’s arm over his shoulder, and they haphazardly stumbled to bed. The moment Hannibal’s head hit the pillow, he was out cold. No amount of shouting his name or shaking his shoulder was going to wake him.

Will laughed at the sight.

So much for all the friskiness…

After securing the house, Will took a quick shower and re-emerged in his t-shirt and boxers. Back in the bedroom, he noted how Hannibal was lying on top of the covers, still in his suit and shoes.

Will sighed.

He untied the shiny Oxfords and set them aside. Then he removed the coat, tie, and—after a moment's contemplation—the belt. Once he smoothed out the creases from the coat, he placed it on a hanger in the rather barren closet. He looped the belt and tie over the hook as well.

Returning to the bed, his uncoordinated fingers struggled to undo the suffocating top two buttons on Hannibal's shirt. Then he decided that was good enough. Hannibal would just have to iron out the wrinkles later.

With much effort, Will yanked the thin covers from beneath Hannibal's heavy body and draped it over both their shoulders. Last, he reached for the remote on the nightstand and turned on the air conditioner.

Blankets with AC seemed counterintuitive, but Will had always found it easier to sleep this way in warm weather. As he lay facing Hannibal, it took less than a minute for his heavy eyelids to flicker shut. The dizzying scent of alcohol permeated each of Hannibal's steady breaths.

With a soft smile, Will cherished his final moment with this rare gift and murmured, "Thanks."

Thanks for showing me.

Trusting me.

"Any reason why you never had an alarm system?"

"In fairness, neither did you."

"I had dogs," Will reminds while testing the bedroom window's motion sensor. The house has a rudimentary security system already in place, which was one of the features that drew Will to it.

While Hannibal was still fast asleep, Will rolled out of bed and threw on some cargo shorts. After an uneasy, lonely breakfast, he decided it couldn't hurt to check for any faulty sensors.

The repeated opening and closing of the bedroom windows finally disturbed Hannibal from his slumber.

Satisfied with this particular test, Will opens the window a couple of inches and locks it in place. “Also, I wasn’t hiding a secret murder basement.”

“But you did hide Randall Tier.”

“That was different.”

“Was it…?”

Will chuckles as he closes the curtain. Sweet darkness engulfs the room once more, and Hannibal—looking like an utter train wreck—somewhat relaxes from the center of the king-sized bed. He tentatively cracks open his eyes for a few seconds. With a sadistic smirk, Will studies the horrendously hungover man who is still lying in his day clothes.

“I’ll get you some water and aspirin.”

“*No aspirin*.”

Will rolls his eyes as he heads to the kitchen. He returns with a glass of iceless water and sets it on the nightstand. Then he waits for a moment, but Hannibal doesn’t seem quite ready to move yet.

“You hungry or…?”

Hannibal rolls to his side and folds his arms over his stomach. “—*No.*”

Will glances over his shoulder at the bathroom in the hallway—their only bathroom. It *is* a bit far.

“How about a bucket?”

“No.”

Will scoffs. He sincerely hopes that Hannibal’s prideful stubbornness won’t backfire spectacularly. But he figures if the man can endure *actual* torture, surely he can withstand *this*.

...right?

“Ok, well, I’ll be making lunch,” Will says as he turns away.

“*Wait—*”

Will stops. “What?”

Hannibal winces and releases a long sigh. “Make me a croque madame. Don’t burn the béchamel. Or overcook the egg. Don’t overdo the cheese. Medium heat when grilling the bread.”

Standing in the doorway, Will crosses his arms.

A full minute goes by before Hannibal somewhat opens his eyes and, upon seeing Will, finally murmurs:

"……please."

By late afternoon—and after a successful lunch—Will decided to cook them both some dinner. With the smell of salt heavy in the air and the fridge already stocked with a variety of seafood, he chose to resurrect an old favorite.

By sundown, he joined Hannibal—restored and rehydrated, more or less—at the umbrella table on the patio. The rich scents saturating the house were apparently too overwhelming for his post-hangover, hypersensitive nose, yet there was genuine intrigue in his eyes as he studied his steaming bowl of gumbo.

Will plopped down onto the rickety metal chair with a sigh. It let out an unholy screech when he dragged it closer to the table.

Although he tried to remain indifferent, he couldn't stop himself from watching Hannibal out of the corner of his eyes as the man lifted a shallow spoonful to his lips.

For a moment, Hannibal let the flavors settle on his palate. Then he nodded once, to no one in particular, and continued to eat.

The inevitable rush of pride nearly caused Will to smile.

With the rolling waves as their soundtrack, they indulged in the rich flavors of Will's past and fell into a comfortable silence.

…though it wasn't long until the undeniable urge to speak overtook Hannibal, and Will knew the incoming conversation was unlikely to be small talk.

Yet Hannibal starts off as such.

"This is good, Will."

"Thanks."

Silence.

Then, with much consternation written plainly across his face, Hannibal sets down his spoon and Will instinctively braces for impact.

"It occurs to me," Hannibal begins matter-of-factly, "that I might've said things I never would have said otherwise, were I sober."

"Don't we all…"

"But the problem lies with my inability to recall my exact words, though I can infer what they must have been."

Will scoffs. “I’m telling you, ‘losing time’ isn’t what it’s cracked up to be…”

The faintest hint of a scowl flickers across Hannibal’s face. “I’d ask you to disregard everything I said, but I fear the damage has already been done.”

“Because it’s true.”

Eyes downcast, Hannibal sets his jaw. “I can’t deny there was likely some truth to my words. But they were not conveyed in a manner I would deem…ideal.”

Appetite gone, Will sighs. “It’s *fine*.” He tosses his spoon into the shallow leftovers of his bowl. Elbows on the table, he rubs his eyes. “Look, it’s not that I… It’s not…” But like a massive pileup on the highway, the tangled words refuse to leave his locked up throat. Not even his mind is capable of thinking them out loud.

Hannibal nods. “You’ve never been with a man.”

“Actually,” Will chuckles dryly, “that’s the least of my concerns…”

Hannibal pauses. “Then…?”

“Because everything is diff—I *told* you last night!” Brow furrowed, Will’s eyes are glued to the table and its chipped paint revealing the rust beneath.

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“I *know*.”

“Then why?”

“*Because it is!*” Will snaps, wanting so desperately to slam his fist onto the table. “Because —” With an anguished sigh, he rubs at his face with both hands.

The engagement ring scalds everything it touches.

To the bone.

To his heart.

Standing over the dancing skull, Will grabs Hannibal by the shoulders and harshly digs his fingers into the bespoke fabric.

In another world, he would have denied it, run away, or even outright lied. Yet here in this particular universe, he accepted a promise—part one of the contract binding his ring finger.

Life is suffering, yet he cannot deny knowing there were less treacherous paths he could’ve taken along the way.

Perhaps, this is one of them.

Head bowed and eyes squeezed shut, Will’s lips draw back.

It was the faintest of whispers, yet he may as well have screamed it. It echoes through the suspended gold dust and hallowed grounds of their Norman chapel.

A confession.

The truth.

……*because it's* you.

Shallow waves glimmer under the ambient light of the red setting sun. Saltwater laps tenderly at the beige sand.

The Atlantic.

Ever at their doorstep.

Hannibal turns his head to face the tranquil ocean. "If our lives were to end right this moment," he begins, a contemplative hand to his chin, "would you regret it?"

"No," Will answers immediately. Resolutely. He lowers his hands from his eyes, exhaustion yet tentative relief written plainly on his face. "Would you?"

"Not in the slightest."

Will lifts a highly skeptical eyebrow. "*Please don't lie to me*."

Hannibal gives him a wry grin. "Never again, Will." Then he lowers his voice to something soft yet achingly sincere. "…I promise."

Will nods. Swallowing back the lump in his throat, he stares into the featureless, darkening horizon. The umbrella rattles in the comfortable breeze.

The ring has faded to a dull ache.

Will sighs. "Just so we're clear, 'difficult' doesn't beget 'impossible.'" Then he smirks. "Also, sins of omission are still fair game."

With a faint smile, Hannibal nods once. "Fair enough."

"And not being afraid to die doesn't mean I intend to sit here and wait for Death to come knocking."

Hannibal widens his grin. "It never occurred to me that we would go down without a fight."

After taking several gulps from his glass of water, Will leans back into his chair and crosses his arms. "But what can we do besides keep a few knives on us at all times? Sleep at different intervals?"

“I see no reason to resort to the latter. At least, as of yet.” Hannibal reclines into the tarnished backrest and crosses his legs. “With such high stakes at play, consider the easier option, as well as the safeguard against it.”

Will lifts his eyebrows. “*Well*, this should be interesting.” He chuckles. “Please, *doctor*, proceed.”

Hannibal maintains a subtle sly look on his face. “Tell me, what is stopping our hunters from offering up some charred remains or preying upon two unfortunate lookalikes?”

“Proof.”

Hannibal nods. “Precisely. Submitting indisputable proof of a positive ID would net them an instant cash reward of ten thousand dollars.”

“So, fresh fingerprints, DNA… Low hanging fruit.”

“Word will spread quickly once the ten grand is redeemed. That will be our cue to disappear. Once our trail goes cold, the cash reward will be available once more.”

“Well, I can’t imagine anyone would be keen to split the fifty million either.”

“As a result, attempts on our lives will likely be from brazen lone wolves or self-sabotaging small groups at most.” Hannibal turns to give Will a reassuring grin. “I think we can handle that, don’t you?”

A loud beep signals the unlocking of the heavy steel door. The deadbolts retract with a sharp clack, and the hinges screech in protest.

Several sets of footsteps enter the brick-walled corridor. To their left are a row of cells. They pay no heed to the inquisitive occupants and continue on until they arrive at the end of the hall.

In this final cell, a man in a jumpsuit rests on a thin mattress. In an almost meditative state, he lies perfectly still on his back with his hands clasped over his middle.

“You’re early,” he murmurs, voice gravelly from disuse.

“The inspection has been postponed to tomorrow, thanks to your guest.”

At that, the man’s eyes snap open.

He turns in time to see the orderly set down a chair just beyond the faded white line.

Eyes wide, he stares with laser focus at the strikingly familiar woman taking her seat on the other side of the glass. Yet her name escapes him.

“Mornin’,” he rasps, studying her like a hawk. Then his gaze pauses on her left arm. The recollection settling in his mind, he tilts his head curiously. “You’re one of Jack

Crawford's…" He lifts his eyes to bore knowingly into hers. "Aren't you."

"Mr. Brown, my name is Miriam Lass." She smiles emptily. "May I speak with you?"

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal: "Well, well, well, if it isn't the consequences of my own actions…"

Noise and Clarity

Chapter Notes

I realized last week that I'd forgotten to tag "Cannibalism"…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Imagine if we submitted our own evidence and continually cashed in on the reward."

"I like how you think, Will." Hannibal grins. "I'll have you know, I once placed a call to Mason's tip line."

Will lifts an eyebrow. "Just for fun?"

"Just for fun."

An array of knives—switchblades, hunting knives, combat knives, and even kitchen knives—line a picnic table in the backyard. Will peruses each one like a kid in a candy store. His hand first gravitates toward the iconic Buck 120 knife. Picking it up, he gets a feel for the weight and admires how the curved edge glints in the midday sun.

Hannibal picks up a paring knife and effortlessly flips it a few times in his right hand. Then he lines himself with the tree and throws.

It spins through the air and sticks perfectly in the center.

At eye level.

After Hannibal fetches the blade from the tree, Will sets down the Buck knife and opts for the more lightweight steak knife. With the flat sides of the blade pinched between his thumb and forefinger, he draws it back and throws.

The point sticks into the bark at neck-level.

First try.

Will grins at his achievement.

—that is, until Hannibal stops beside him and throws. The paring knife soars and stabs squarely into the base of the steak knife's handle.

Will blinks. "What the hell?" He whips around. "How did you *do* that?"

Nonchalant, Hannibal merely gestures at the tree. “I aim for the middle.”

Will frowns. He picks up an open switchblade. Squinting at the stacked knives, he aims and throws.

It goes wide, and the blade stabs into the grass some ways beyond the tree.

Will sighs and trudges over to fetch it. Hannibal walks over as well and yanks the two kitchen knives from the bark.

“I’m curious, Will,” Hannibal begins as they reconvene at the table, “are you near-sighted or far-sighted?”

“Neither. Well—” Will occupies himself with wiping the dirt and bits of grass off the switchblade. “—maybe a *little* nearsighted.”

“I suppose that’s fitting.”

“Shut up.” Will sneers. He fidgets by repeatedly flicking the switchblade open and closed. “I can manage fine without glasses. Obviously.” Then he sets it aside and picks up one of the daggers. “Why?”

Hannibal occupies himself with brushing away the specks of bark from the kitchen knives. “I was just thinking of how you incapacitated Jack.” Then he pauses to look at Will. “Or was that not your intent?”

“…Like how it was for Eldon Stammets?” Will worries his lower lip. “I don’t know. I guess?” Eyeing himself in the blade’s reflection, he notes the subtle changes in his face—his wrinkles slightly sharper, a few strands of white amid the hair by his temples, and the raised scar on his forehead somewhat lighter. He sighs. “I just threw the knife to stop him from shooting.”

“And yet, despite not killing him, you still felt that ‘sprig of zest’?”

“Yes.” Will closes his eyes.

…because he saw me.

Darkness choked the Hobbs’ kitchen. The shadows closed in on them—a haze of noise shaped by scattering flies.

Standing over the dried pool of Abigail’s arterial blood, the world was ending, reality was crumbling around him, the gun rattled within his quaking hands…

And through the fevered red haze of his fury, that imago of his closest, most trusted friend shattered before his very eyes.

I can see you now.

Will sighs. “It must have taken everything to not react…when I told you that.” He slowly opens his eyes—dark yet tempered. “Had you smiled in Hobbs’ kitchen, like you did outside my cell, I would’ve shot you right then and there.”

“I know,” he answers.

Will lifts an eyebrow. “That must’ve been hell, being fully conscious of your darkness, yet never being seen.”

“I let my quarry see me.” Hannibal absentmindedly straightens each weapon on the table. “For years, I managed to convince myself that this was enough.”

Will scoffs. “I can’t imagine all the *abject horror* and *agonized screams* were very profound…”

Eyes downcast, Hannibal’s focus stills on a peeling knife. As his eyes trace the talon-like curve, he murmurs, “You never feared me.”

Will pauses. Then, facing away from Hannibal, he shrugs. “How could I? I was too busy being *pissed* and dreaming up highly *unethical* ways to *slaughter* you.” He shakes his head. “Besides…” Spinning a dagger in his palm, he narrows his eyes at the tree and aims. “We fear most what we don’t know.”

“…or can never understand.” Hannibal lifts his gaze from the hooked blade to observe Will’s stance.

Will hurls the dagger. But it rotates a quarter too far and bounces off the trunk. He scowls and picks up a fillet knife.

Yet as he draws back his right hand, warm fingers firmly close around his wrist. Will freezes, yet Hannibal remains undeterred while he places his free hand on Will’s left hip and nudges it forward. Then he lowers Will’s right hand by several inches and maneuvers it closer to his body.

“Aim for the middle,” Hannibal murmurs, voice rumbling low in Will’s ear. Then he releases him and steps aside.

After suppressing a shudder, Will wrinkles his brow. The new stance feels awkward and the wind up too short, but he focuses on a notch at the center of the trunk and swings forth the blade.

Along the once quiet stretch of sand, a sea of bystanders shuffle around for the best view. The front row only gets a few seconds to satiate their morbid curiosity before another group surges past them.

Only those with experience know how to stake their claim and keep it.

The camera shutter clicks in rapidfire-fashion. It only pauses while she kneels to get a closer, grislier angle.

Seconds later, the blare of numerous sirens and flashing blue lights signal the end of her photoshoot. Police flood the area and push back the onlookers.

Her job complete, Freddie vacates the scene while reviewing her prized photos. It's only then that she observes what her lens has captured.

The victim is a man, early to mid-thirties, seemingly of Cuban descent, average height and build, in drab plainclothes—utterly unremarkable.

Except for one thing.

A slender kitchen knife juts from a gap in the front left side of his ribs.

Straight through the heart.

Death was quick, and he either subsequently fell into the ocean or was dumped. Regardless, judging from the state of decay, he definitely washed ashore from somewhere not too terribly far away.

The ocean would've destroyed any evidence, luckily for the perpetrators.

Yes, those two were *definitely* lucky. She concludes that the body must have fallen into the ocean, and they simply had no way of retrieving the damning knife.

…probably because the blade had been thrown.

And only two people in the world are capable of such deadly precision.

While hailing a taxi, she hurriedly breaks the scoop with a post to all her socials. In doing so, she's pleased to note that her follower count has increased by nearly two hundred since last night.

The post goes live beside yesterday's blog of her adventure at the yacht club—in search of those fugitives, of course.

At last, a taxi yields, and just as well, since she was preparing to deploy her most foolproof maneuver. So instead of jumping in front of the hood, she hops into the backseat and plays back the robotic voice of an online translator. Muttering expletives, the driver harshly pulls into traffic.

Being prone to motion sickness, she reluctantly pockets her phone, which is in the midst of receiving an onslaught of notifications, and gazes out the window. While observing the rustic buildings rush by, she can't help but feel a smidgen of pride for her perpetually death-defying boys.

She also wonders if the idiots got hitched yet.

Then again, probably not. Will would be the one to drag his heels in that regard, saying shit like, "My horse is hitched to a post that is closer to 'platonic and furiously straight' than 'romantic and fluid.'" According to last week's poll, 69 percent of her followers agree.

After making amends with a generous tip, Freddie scurries out of the taxi and back into her motel room. While the photos copy over to her laptop, she opens a blank webpage. The new and improved—and intentionally tacky—bloody TattleCrime logo adorns the top banner.

Staring at the template, she sighs. She wouldn't call them haters, since it *is* logical to raise doubt in the absence of a sighting, but she dreads having to make excuses for the naysayers.

And maybe, just maybe…

It would *be nice to see them again.*

The sane part of Freddie smacks her forehead.

With more DM's endlessly flooding in and news stations calling to beg for the licensing rights to her photos, she mutes her phone and begins to type an article worthy of an insta-click from the Ripper himself.

Murder Husbands™ Kill Again in Cuban First

Hannibal first detected the sparse molecules of blood drifting aloft the heavy petrichor. Just beyond the front door, keys rattle. Metal scrapes metal as the key misses its mark several times before finally slotting into place and withdrawing the bolt.

Like a specter, his beloved crosses the threshold, still dripping with rainwater. After kicking off his shoes, he mechanically shrugs off his stained charcoal gray raincoat and hooks it onto the coat hanger. The staccato of droplets steadily patter upon the hardwood floor.

Hannibal sets his iPad aside yet observes in silence from his upholstered chair. His eyes flick to the black messenger bag, its strap digging heavily into Will's right shoulder.

With a charged silence looming between them, Hannibal shifts his gaze to study Will's distant yet tumultuous expression.

Awaiting.

And so, with bated breath, Hannibal closes his eyes.

Show me.

Freshwater rushes in with the unerring passage of time. With it comes the crisp air and pure scent to cleanse the residual salt from his once deluged lungs.

Countless branches rustle in the gentle breeze. Several birds chirp as they flit by. Upon opening his eyes, Hannibal finds himself standing at the heart of that exquisite pine forest in Maine.

Without hesitation, he steps off the weathered outcrop and through the beckoning palace door.

He wades into the quiet of the stream.

Hannibal's shoes splash upon the pooling, uneven concrete.

The walkway was narrow, scarcely the width of two people. Below, the raging whitewater spillway raced for the sea.

He stops beside Will, who, at this time, only had a light mist coating his raincoat. The hood effectively shrouded his face.

Yet, upon abruptly halting in his tracks, Will knew the split second he was found.

Hannibal follows his line of sight to a silver sedan parked to the ten o'clock on the opposite side. The driver side door slammed shut as a man strode toward the bridge, his eyes trained on Will.

Panic constricting his throat, Will glanced over his shoulder at the second man approaching from the other side.

Will instinctively reached inside his coat.

Hannibal flinches as the gunshot echoed down the concrete ravine. In the driver's hand was the smoking gun. Hannibal whips around to check on Will before recalling his role as a mere spectator of this memory.

Will wasn't struck, and Hannibal refuses to entertain the idea if he had been.

That is for another world's self to deal with.

Quivering hands scarcely raised above his head, Will sank to his knees. As they closed in, the two assailants hurled curses and insults at each other for the near-crossfire mishap.

All the while, Hannibal observes Will's cowering posture with intrigue. He kneels directly in front of his beloved to get a better view of his face and notices Will's burner phone nestled within his raincoat's inner pocket—the one he had been reaching for.

A dull pang strikes Hannibal's heart. Calling for help would've been futile. Perhaps it was to say goodbye.

To tell me to run?

Unable to resist, he reaches out and rests his right hand on the side of Will's face, fingers cupping the base of his skull.

And realizes.

Amid Will's hitched breaths and terrified quaking was the soft skin below his bearded jaw and the deep thrum of blood beneath it.

Not elevated or fluttering.

A march.

Brisk, yet steady.

And not a beat above 85.

With a devilishly wide smirk, Hannibal stands and steps aside.

The moment the gunman stepped within fifteen feet, Will's trembling ceased.

Then he snapped down his hand. The flash of a blade slid perfectly into his grasp.

—just as Hannibal had seen him rehearse hundreds of times.

Within the same second, the fillet knife was sent catapulting toward its final destination.

Steel lodged deep into the gunman's heart, instantly severing the muscled walls of its chambers.

Though death wasn't *entirely* instant.

Hannibal observes that fascinating final split second of life—between beats—as the man dropped his chin to calmly look at the knife's hilt. He even managed to graze the handle with his fingers.

Then it was lights out. Like a puppet with its strings cut, he toppled over the railing and into the raging abyss.

As predicted, his wingman stood frozen in shock for several crucial seconds. Will used that time to dive for the fallen gun. The man snapped out of his trance yet recoiled to the ground upon meeting the barrel of a revolver between his eyes.

Hannibal stops to Will's right, assuming the position he once took before a gutted mare and her wretched contents. He studies Will's face. To his astonishment, he sees no trace of that detached, misplaced hatred, but a spark of dazzling gold passing over Will's dilated eyes.

A pendulum.

In a vision solely privy to Will's enigmatic mind, Hannibal can only watch from afar as Will witnessed the world—and himself—from his victim's horror-stricken eyes.

Feeling.

Judging.

Empathy.

Pure.

"*What do you see?*" Hannibal breathes. In a flicker, the crimson letters briefly manifest themselves in the same crude handwriting he once left below a telescope.

Beside her “gift-wrapped” arm.

Then Will shuddered as his own conscious returned to his body. And in his turbulent blue eyes…

Hannibal smirks.

Tough luck for this one.

Seems it truly was a pig, after all.

“Turn around,” Will muttered, voice tired and devoid of all warmth.

His prey shakily obeyed. Hands by his head, he struggled to face away while shuffling on his knees.

Once fully out of the pig’s peripherals, Will sighed. After a moment, he lowered his arm and stowed the gun in the back of his waistband. Then he drew a hunting knife from the hidden sheath beneath his shirt.

In awe, Hannibal follows Will as he silently closed the gap and reached in front of the pig’s neck. He can almost feel the hot bite of the blade against his own throat as Will, without hesitation, placed the edge below the ear and—

Hannibal gasps upon finding himself thrown back into his living room chair. Breaths shallow yet ragged, he quickly swallows to contain his indignation. But the words spill from his mouth anyway, utter frustration lacing his breathless voice. “*Why’d you—?*”

“Stop?” Eyes to the floor, Will places a hand on the bag’s strap and leans on his left leg. Then, with a crooked smile briefly tugging the scarred side of his face, he shrugs off the bag and tosses it forth.

Hannibal catches it on his lap. The fresh, metallic scent immediately overwhelms his olfactory senses.

It’s heavy.

“You were taking too damn long.” This time, Will smirks and it stays. “The meat’s gonna spoil.”

With great anticipation, Hannibal fumbles to unbuckle the flap. As he peers into the dark saturated bag, his lips draw back into a jagged smile. The perfect recipe slots into place at the forefront of his mind.

Foie gras.

It’s the closest thing to a “guilty” pleasure of his, and of course Will knows it.

What a cunning boy you are.

"It seems, since our fall from grace…I've killed two and you've killed two," Hannibal says while closing the bag and giving his nose a reprieve. He then looks up at Will and, with pure adoration in his eyes, grins softly. "Even Steven?"

Will slowly lifts his chin. At last, he locks eyes with his beloved. A delicate smile gracing his lips, he murmurs:

"Even Steven."

Outside, the steady patter of rain softens to silence, along with the ceasing of droplets from Will's raincoat. While a corpse is swept to sea some miles away, sunlight at last seeps through the scattered cotton clouds. The warmth casts sparking white, which shimmers across the dewy grass.

And so passed by the April showers.

Chapter End Notes

Make way for sweet May flowers
And then comes June, a moon, and you

Rising from the Sea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the dead of night, the silhouette of a man stops beside a tree. His fingers graze the thin notches—the pale sapwood stark against the unmarred bark—concentrated at the center.

A thousand cuts in line with his heart.

Eyes to the packed dirt at the base of the trunk, he trails after the overlapping shoe prints and trodden grass. On the picnic table are more nicks in the wood. A fidgety habit.

He crosses to the patio. The frayed umbrella is closed, yet it softly and rhythmically rattles within the center of the painted, rusted table. The rickety chairs are positioned at the 7 and 10 o'clock, in perfect view of the ocean.

Behind him, the glass patio door beckons to be shattered. Eyeing the conspicuous sensor glued to the inside handle, he follows the walls until he spots a small square window about six feet off the ground. Four wide shutters cover it.

He tilts his head while staring at the slats of frosted glass. They're not even fully closed.

It's too good to be true.

Yet despite his burning skepticism, he sees no sign of any sensors or a trap.

With ease, Matthew removes each shutter. After slipping off his shoes, he heaves himself to the window sill and maneuvers inside. His socked feet make no sound upon the bathroom tile. He takes a moment to scan the area. Everything is in pairs—towels, soap, combs, toothbrushes, aftershave…

The corner of his mouth twitches. The humble, tidy domesticity nearly makes him laugh.

Stepping beyond the open door, he peers down the hallway. On one end is the entrance to the dark living room. On the other is a closed door.

He silently draws the gun from his belt holster. Ears straining for the slightest sound, he's inches from the bedroom door when suddenly he hears a faint creak.

The breath catches in his throat. For a second, his entire body freezes. Then he leans his ear in closer.

Steady creaking.

His jaw drops in a soundless gasp. Then he covers his madly grinning mouth with his free hand.

After a few more shameless moments of delay, he readjusts his grip on the pistol and reluctantly takes a few steps back.

Heart pounding and adrenaline flooding his veins, he kicks open the door.

And there upon the bed—

Earlier that evening

Will turns up the volume on the record player until he can hear it over the clatter of dishes and as he travels throughout the house.

It's the third volume of a collection of short stories.

Horror stories.

In the late afternoon, Will fished it out of the crammed cabinet and read the sleeve's *harrowing* description with amusement.

But first, it was Hannibal's turn.

Accompanying their dinner of freshly shucked oysters was a collection of Satie's pieces. Suddenly, Hannibal smirked.

"What?" Will dryly asked between chews.

Hannibal took his sweet time sipping from his wine. "I was just thinking of the last time I played this. 'Fantaisie Valse'—a short yet riveting piece, as you can tell." He kept his eyes to the half-empty glass as he set it down. "Upon striking the final chord, I told Bedelia that I endeavored to eat you." Then faintest hint of shame graced his sharp features. "…as a means to forgive you of your influence."

Will merely lifted an eyebrow. The raised scar on his forehead wrinkled along with it. "Well, *excuse me* for *existing* and bringing you down a few thousand steps."

Hannibal swallowed. "Additionally…" He sighed, occupying himself with his utensils. "Turns out, there was nothing to forgive."

Nor a reason to keep you that way.

Will rolled his eyes while finishing his last oyster.

Because I would've stayed with you.

Eventually.

With the ring of the final chord lingering in the air, it was finally Will's turn. As Hannibal began cleaning up, Will switched out the vinyl.

The narration was just as hammy as he hoped. The voice was low and infused with melodrama. The accent was that old-timey transatlantic. It reminded him of those *Twilight Zone* episodes with its eerie monochromatic worlds and sinister, ironic plot twists.

Most amusing were the sound effects.

The surprisingly detailed foley made the story's world vividly tangible in Will's mind, though he could tell by Hannibal's bristling stance that the man found it to be akin to nails on chalkboard or an off-key soprano. But Hannibal said nothing as he scrubbed away at the dishes, and Will couldn't help but smile.

The things you do for me…

Only for you.

Despite the cheesiness, Will inevitably became engrossed in the plot while he worked away, packing their necessities. His relationship with fiction had always been…questionable. Being who he is, his imagination had a habit of kicking into overdrive and getting him hopelessly lost in these nonexistent worlds. By adulthood, he finally learned to fully differentiate between fact and fiction. But it's been years since he last consumed something well and truly *not* non-fiction.

Now, he finds himself genuinely entrenched in this joke of a psychological thriller.

The protagonist is an isolated man who's slowly losing his grip on sanity, "Tell-Tale Heart"-style. In a crime of passion, he kills his neighbor, who had apparently been stalking and gaslighting him. But before calling police, he becomes plagued with doubt and decides to hide the bloody body in a crawl space. Then he covers the entrance with a bookshelf.

That night, he awakens to the sound of blood dripping.

A viscous, steady pitter-patter.

Then wood scrapes slowly and heavily across the floorboards.

In a panic, the man sits upright on his bed. But the sounds have stopped. Staring into the silent darkness, he strains to hear past the thundering palpitations of his ailing heart. Yet he hears nothing.

Just as his fractured mind decides to dismiss it, from down the hallway, wood creaks.

Then, again.

A slight crackle from a floorboard.

The rhythm is uneven—two brisk steps followed by a pause and the sound of a broken ankle dragging forth to reset the cycle.

The man leaps out of bed and rushes to find something to brace the door. All the while, the cursed gait nears closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer—

"*Will*."

Will flinches and abruptly finds himself back in the cozy living room of their Cuban beachside house. Still a bit dazed, he glances over his shoulder.

Hannibal is glaring at him from his place at the sink. He's in the middle of scrubbing out the basin. As the man irritably returns to cleaning, Will blinks several times before finally realizing the reason for the interruption.

The record is skipping.

Looping, to be exact.

Wood repeatedly creaks to the beat of that erratic zombie gait. Now that he thinks of it, this is a worse fate than whatever was scripted. Perpetually awaiting doom.

No closure.

With a sigh, Will crosses over and turns it off.

"Was beginning to sound like a different genre," Hannibal remarks under his breath.

Caught off guard, Will scoffs. "Now *that* would be quite the twist." He removes the vinyl and squints at the lined surface. Sure enough, there's a slight scratch about three-quarters in the radius. He places it back in its sleeve and sighs. "What if we died like that?"

While drying his hands on the dish towel, Hannibal raises his brow. He strolls over to the open suitcase and inspects its contents. To the untrained eye, his face appears completely neutral. But Will can see that faint upward curve in the corner of his lips. "In *flagrante delicto*?"

Will scoffs. "You would find that glorious, wouldn't you…"

Satisfied with the neatness of their color-coded, folded clothes, Hannibal shoots him a cat-like grin. “I can think of no better end than to die in your embrace.”

“And *quite* the embrace too,” Will quips, but the levity trails off with the wandering of his mind.

He had tried so hard, when he held Hannibal well—knuckles white, tendons taut—as they plummeted headfirst into the roiling Atlantic.

He doesn’t know why their necks didn’t snap on impact.

The shock was so great, it didn’t even register when Hannibal had slipped from his grasp. Simultaneously paralyzed by pain and numbed by the icy depths, he remembers sinking blindly into the smothering abyss.

…stubbornly clinging to consciousness.

“I can’t deny it would’ve been easier,” Hannibal murmurs. “Death removes choice, as well as the burden of it.” He walks over and stops beside Will. “But your instinct to survive has always had a habit of overriding any such predilections.”

“So has yours,” Will whispers, solemn.

A soft fondness in his eyes, Hannibal tilts his head to look at him. “Are you not also one of those ‘pitiful things,’ denied those machines yet refusing to die?”

A smile flickers across Will’s mouth. Then he nonchalantly turns to meet Hannibal’s eyes. “Y’know… Sometimes I can’t help but feel like I’m the brunt of Fate’s sick jokes.”

Hannibal grins. “And do you not find it funny?”

Will breaks eye contact to pick up the sleeve containing the broken record. After absentmindedly flipping it around a few times, a sprig of whimsy sprouts intrusively amid his wayward thoughts. With a resigned sigh, he mutters:

“…wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

Later that night

While on the opposite side of the island lies a shattered record player upon a bullet-ridden bed, a rental car turns down a winding gravel driveway. At the end looms a humble, countryside guest house.

The homeowner greets them with enthusiasm and assists with their luggage. Pleased with the service, Hannibal gives her a generous tip.

She immediately takes his hand and vigorously shakes it. “¡Gracias! Señor…”

“Hancock.”

“¡Señor Hancock!”

Will rolls his eyes as he steps into the house.

The interior is quaint, almost cottage-like, with a decor of ornately carved, mahogany wood fixtures. Will sets down his suitcase in the bedroom and eagerly scopes out their new abode.

This time, Hannibal was the one who took complete care of selecting their new destination. The guest house arrangement gave Will pause, but it was tucked away from the main house by a slight hillside and row of trees. Still, surely he could have chosen a more secluded location.

Then, at the far end of the house, Will peers into a dark room and fumbles for the switch. Warm light floods the area.

At the very center, and perfectly framed by the four-panel patio door, is a magnificent concert grand piano—a Steinway Model D.

Will slowly approaches and stares at the expanse of glossy black lacquer and his own intrigued reflection therein. Then Hannibal appears in the entrance to the hallway. He joins Will beside the keys.

Will absentmindedly prods at one of them. “A” chimes sweetly in the well-designed acoustics of the room. With a scoff, he murmurs, “At least it’s not a harpsichord.”

Hannibal heaves open the lid. “Do you play?” he asks while propping it open. “I assume your piano in Wolf Trap wasn’t merely for decor.”

Will sighs and shoves his hands into his pockets. “Look, even *I* could tell that thing was horrendously out of tune.”

“Which you’d know by playing it.”

Will shrugs. “I might’ve dabbled…”

With a soft smile, Hannibal cordially gestures to the seat. “Please.”

“Please *what*?”

But Hannibal expertly deflects the abrasiveness. “For the past week, you’ve been ruminating on some sort of serenade. You hear it behind your eyes, yet you refuse to give voice to it.”

Defeated, Will smirks. “Because I *can’t*.”

“Try.”

Biting his lip, Will stares at the vast lineup of ivory and ebony keys. Then, under Hannibal's patient scrutiny, he takes a seat and locates middle C. He hovers his hand a few keys to the right.

F…

G.

A-flat.

B-flat……

The notes humming into the ambient silence, Hannibal takes a step closer, his deep-set eyes intensely focused on Will's right hand.

Will shakes his head. "That's all I know."

"Play it again."

With a roll of his eyes, Will holds the F-key for two beats. Then, for one beat each, G followed by A-flat. Last is B-flat, of which he holds and lets it ring.

Suddenly, Hannibal wedges himself onto the right side of the bench. Brow furrowed, Will moves over. Yet while he's practically spilling off the left corner, their shoulders are still touching.

"Once more."

Exhaling through his nose, Will places his fingers back over the middle keys.

This time, in the pause after F, Hannibal places his hands two octaves up and plays a chord—A-flat major 7.

The next note is in perfect sync. As Will's melody ascends, Hannibal's chords descend. With the holding of the sustain pedal, the final chord hangs hauntingly in the still air.

Unresolved.

Will can't contain his smile. "Well? What is—"

"—from Gustav Holst's *The Planets*," Hannibal answers a bit too quickly. "Movement two. Venus, the bringer of peace."

After a stunned pause, Will glances away. "Of course it is…"

With a fond smile, Hannibal tilts his head toward him. "Besides being the embodiment of love and desire, she has many epithets to her name." He parts his mouth a moment before he speaks.

“Like ‘Venus Anadyomene,’” Will cuts in, stealing the words from Hannibal’s throat. “Venus rising from the sea.”

Hannibal blinks, impressed for a split second before finally admitting, “Yes.”

Will smiles crookedly at the small win and asks, “Have you heard of the ‘Wave Theory’?” Yet again, he continues before Hannibal can respond. “A century ago, an archeologist once observed a rare phenomenon off the coast of Cyprus,” he recites, slowly closing his eyes.

And there he stands, when next he opens them, on the blustery, rocky shore of an island nation halfway across the world.

Hannibal stops beside him.

Eyes on the roiling sea, Will takes a sharp breath. “When two breakers are swept together by the winter winds and collide at a ninety degree angle,” his eyes immediately pinpoint two such waves, “the result is a sudden burst of water reaching up to fifteen feet high. The wind carries the descending mist, and there…”

They observe the violent clash. The roaring geyser leaps for the heavens, and within the drifting foam and gently cascading mist is *her*—with her flowing hair and dripping arms—rising from the sea.

When the last of the raining droplets have returned, Hannibal looks to Will. “And did she, too, rise from the sea when our paths crossed into the Atlantic?”

Will shudders, yet as night falls and the scent of blood drifts heavily in the freezing air, he can see it.

There, in the wake of their destructive embrace—in the only place they could make for each other in this world—was her.

Love.

Born from the sea.

Will licks his lips as he contemplates. When at last the thrashing ocean fades, replaced by the warmth and quiet of their new Cuban home, he asks, “Why choose the *Primavera* over Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*?”

Hannibal nods once. “While indulgent to the senses, the latter is ultimately very straightforward in meaning. *Primavera’s* truth has arguably been lost to time, with the death of the artist and those who knew him.”

“Well, you *do* have a knack for obsessively pursuing that which eludes you.”

“Only if the subject is worthy of such fascination,” Hannibal murmurs, adoration swelling in his heart. No longer able to resist, he grasps the base of Will’s head with both hands and pulls him into a fervent kiss.

They have to strain to twist into the proper angle. Will's right ankle hooks behind Hannibal's left, and to stop from falling off the bench, he clutches the back of Hannibal's dress shirt collar and curls his left fingers into Hannibal's right shoulder.

But as Hannibal breaks to tilt his head the other way, Will quickly places his fingers over Hannibal's mouth.

"Ah-ah," Will chides, fully aware he's playing with fire. Pupils blown wide in the warm lighting, Hannibal glares ravenously. Yet with his lips damp and hair in disarray, Will merely grins, completely unfazed. "Tell you what, I'll let you kiss me again on one condition."

Beneath his fingers, Will feels Hannibal minutely tilt his head in his trademark show of curiosity.

"I'm thinking of another song, but I only know the first chord."

Challenge accepted, Hannibal leans back a bit. Will grazes his fingertips across the smooth tops of the white keys. Both hands spread wide, he pauses over the correct placement near the center of the piano.

Then, in a forte dynamic, he plays four octaves of G. With the utmost concentration, Hannibal stares at Will's hands.

As the silence stretches on, Will removes his fingers from the piano and glances away with a feigned, pitying look in his quirked brow. "Nothing? Alright, I'll give you a hint." He glances at his watch. "It's 12:01 AM."

Just like that, Will can spot the moment the answer clicks into place in that beautiful, enigmatic mind. Hannibal places his hands on the keys where Will's once were.

Smirking deviously, Will leans in close. Mouth scarcely brushing Hannibal's left ear, he whispers:

"*…no mistakes*."

And so, in this humble abode tucked away on a rural Cuban hillside, the quiet of the night is broken by a lovesick virtuoso and his impassioned tickling of the ivories. He, too, performs from the concert hall of his memory palace, where seated front and center is the only audience who ever mattered.

Arms draped across the adjacent seats, Will listens—transported and entranced.

Vivaldi.

It's the first day of summer.

Chapter End Notes

And a storm is brewing…

Holst - “Venus” for two pianos

Vivaldi - “Summer” (Storm) piano ver.

Stag Night

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional warnings:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Under the pitch darkness of the new moon, it was a black tie sort of night.

Though not entirely.

Ever eager to defy convention, Will chose their attire—jet black fitted suits, pants, and polished shoes, accented by a deep blue dress shirt and matching pocket square on Will, which complemented Hannibal's wine red shirt and silk paisley handkerchief.

And tucked beneath their lapels, slipped up their sleeves, and strapped above their ankles are freshly sharpened blades befitting of a seasoned butcher.

It started with an innocuous remark early one quiet morning.

July 1st.

Hannibal had just finished whipping up their signature dish. He handed over a perfectly garnished bowl to Will, who smirked as he took the protein scramble and immediately dumped it onto a plate.

Seated across the short width, they ate in silence. Elbows on the table, Will nonchalantly sipped at his coffee. Then his front teeth briefly scraped his fork as he popped a piece of sausage and egg into his mouth.

But as he chewed, his brow furrowed. Hannibal intently watched him over the top of his mug as Will swallowed.

"Sausage isn't very good," he muttered.

Silverware clinked against ceramic as Hannibal began to eat away at his portion. "I would agree."

After washing down the bland taste with coffee, Will sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. "I suppose it'd help if it was *fresher*?"

"…and not substituted."

Sighing through his nose, Will glanced down at his plate and smiled.

Since the bridge incident, they've been lying low. It was compounded by Freddie's follow-up article of a ransacked seaside abode, which was strewn with their fingerprints, DNA, and leftover belongings.

Despite the close call with Will, Hannibal was still the most recognizable amongst the general public. In addition, the bounty hunters were too busy fighting over the lucrative "evidence" and attempting to pass it off as proof of a new sighting.

As predicted.

So Will grew out his beard, mussed up his hair, placed in colored contact lenses, and ventured into town for their supplies.

Although cooped up once more, Hannibal went about his day without complaint. He preoccupied himself with playing lengthy piano concertos, reading, drawing, cooking, exercising, and—to Will's surprise—adding to his gifted book of gouache paintings.

Although he wasn't asked, Will went out of his way to bring back high grade ingredients. But he was wary of creating a traceable pattern, and so, most times, he had to settle for plain-old grocery store food. Hannibal didn't so much as twitch his lip at the cheap brands. It almost seemed as if he made it his mission to create Michelin star meals from the dredges, which Will supposed was inline with Hannibal's M.O. anyway, making divine cuisine out of the detestable.

Not only that, but it seemed a waste for the astoundingly aesthetic plating to only be enjoyed by the two of them. Yet it amused Will to no end to see the glint of pride in Hannibal's eyes when Will would lift his brow at the elaborate works of art and complex, delicious taste.

Yet not *all* was well.

After moving into the guest house, they didn't talk much.

But the silence wasn't malicious. Over time, they had grown comfortable in each other's presence. There was no need to constantly engage, impress, or entertain.

Yet as the days ticked by, Will finally put a name to that subtly growing sense of unease.

It was the final week of June when Will realized—for certain—that Hannibal was *nervous*.

"Pre-wedding jitters?" Will asked out of the blue one evening, while they were seated in their respective living room chairs.

Eyes never leaving his book, Hannibal merely smirked for a half-second.

Will was aware that wasn't *quite* it, yet he knew full well that getting his fiancé to relinquish the truth was a lost cause.

Sins of omission were still fair game, after all.

But it was about time that Hannibal got some fresh air. Endless possibilities in mind, Will contemplated how exactly Hannibal could make the most of his grand night out.

Then Hannibal decided for him with a shockingly disappointing breakfast.

“Your turn to provide the *meat*?” Will pointedly asked, scraping aside the rubbery bits of tasteless, un-smoked sausage.

“I was hoping we could go together.”

Will blinked at the sudden bluntness. “*Tonight*?”

Hannibal gazed at Will while languidly chewing. “I suppose tonight is as good as any.”

Will sat stock still. Then, anticipation thrumming in his veins, the corner of his mouth briefly perked into a crooked smile.

And Hannibal, at last with a spark in his once distant eyes, reflected that devilish grin and gestured to Will’s plate with his fork. “Finish your breakfast.”

In lieu of plastic murder suits, this will have to do.

In addition to looking sharp, the black fabric would hide the blood. That afternoon, Will shaved down his beard to its usual stubbled length, applied copious amounts of that atrocious aftershave, and then styled and combed his tousled hair—complete with the “murder curl” gracing the scar on his forehead.

When he finally stepped out of the bathroom, the look on Hannibal’s face—a stunned speechlessness that melted to a soft, adoring smile and a glimmer in his warm eyes—was one that he would cherish forever.

With the rest of their supplies stowed in the trunk, Will seated himself behind the wheel with the perfect spot in mind.

Two weeks ago, he had inadvertently wandered through a particularly shady block while on his way to the market. Sure enough, a tall, posturing young man attempted to crowd Will into a blind spot.

The man drew a switchblade from his deep jeans pocket and demanded money with a heavy accent. Five years ago, Will would’ve relented, as any tourist would.

Now, he nearly laughed in utter relief.

Not a bounty hunter.

Just a two-bit thief.

All it took was that same tiny knife being redirected into its owner’s ribs. Hardly a flesh wound, yet the first sight of blood was enough to stir a horrified yelp from the kid. He ran for

home like a kicked puppy, and Will almost felt bad.

The next time was different.

After not so discreetly watching him pick up the groceries, a group of six began to trail him. These fellows were far more seasoned.

And they were hungry to be millionaires.

Will abruptly made a break for his car by first hiding beneath a parked truck. They ran past and then doubled back. Hidden beside the tires, Will could only watch as they closed in on the truck and then viciously bashed open the driver side window. Bits of glass rained down on the asphalt. The vehicle rocked as they peered into the cab and then scoured the back.

Knife in hand, Will knew there was no hope once found. Amid their angered shouts and ransacking, he wondered how assured death would be with a deep slice through his own carotid.

Where Abigail was cut.

The corner of his mouth twitched as he envisioned Hannibal's disapproving look.

"What else was I supposed to do?" Will would remark when they eventually reunited in Hell. "I can't tolerate pain as well as you."

"I would not have blamed you for turning me in."

"You would've been killed."

"I didn't ask you to die for me."

"People *normally* don't *need* to be *asked!*"

Will comforted himself with their imagined afterlife bickering. He didn't pray, but he did hope.

Then, the die was cast, and when it came to a rest…

Will found himself in a world where he returned home to Hannibal that night.

They didn't check beneath the truck.

Under the cover of darkness, they parked curbside on that fated shady street.

And Will couldn't feel safer.

"How many are we thinking tonight?" he asks, voice low.

Hannibal works his jaw for a moment. "Six."

Will blinks. He hadn't told Hannibal about that incident, and yet…

"It's six days until our wedding," Hannibal clarifies as he exits the car.

With an amused huff, Will nods. "Right." Then he pauses. "…Is *this* your idea of a *bachelor party?*"

But, with the subtlest pep in his step, Hannibal is already strolling halfway down the block.

Victim #1 recognized the trademarked cannibal.

Hannibal, in turn, stared down the barrel of the ghost gun without so much as a hint of concern.

It started in a busier area near a bar. While concentrating on keeping up with Hannibal, Will suddenly felt two taps to the back of his hand. They hadn't planned what that would mean, yet Will instantly read the room and disappeared into the crowd.

Several minutes later, the barrel of a gun nudged Hannibal's lower back.

"Keep walking," the American demanded.

Once conveniently in a secluded alleyway, the man backed away several paces and ordered Hannibal to face him.

"Where's Graham?" he demanded, finger leaning heavily on the trigger.

As Will closed in from behind, he was half-tempted to drop a one-liner.

"Name's *Cunning*ham," he would mutter, while driving his knife through their victim's ribs. "Gil Cunningham."

Instead, he clamped a hand over the victim's mouth as Hannibal wrenched the gun away and swiftly gutted the man "Hobbs-style."

Without so much as getting a drop on their clothes, they lowered their first catch to the pavement.

Will wrinkled his nose at the overwhelming scent of alcohol. "You smelt that from a mile away, didn't you? I bet his liver's done for."

Hannibal nodded while clinically carving into the body cavity. "Severe cirrhosis." After a pause, he added, "He would've died anyway."

Will grinned at the attempt at consideration. "Damned if I'll feel for this one."

Hannibal smirked.

They took his lungs.

Their *third* victim didn't recognize them.

Ironically, that resulted in her downfall.

She specialized in preying on the blissful ignorants. Tonight, she spotted two tourists thinking they were untouchable and obligated to not have a care in the world. The older one looked too sophisticated, like hailing from old European money, but the younger looked to be a naive fool.

While he was occupied laughing at his partner's joke, she slipped some powder into his drink.

Then she innocently sipped at her own drink and watched from the corner of her eye as the bearded one picked up the tainted glass and brought it to his lips.

Suddenly, his partner reached out and covered the opening with his hand.

She froze. Had he seen?

But the eyebrow-less man merely gave his partner a flirtatious, drunken smile. "Why settle for cheap scotch, Gil?" he asked with a strange accent, prying the glass away and swapping it with a daiquiri. "When in Cuba, you might as well get a taste for it."

Gil relented, yet she noticed how he still eyed his scotch longingly. It was only a matter of time.

Half an hour later, she noticed him stumbling out of the bar. His glass of scotch now sat empty on the counter. She gave him a few moments, but his friend was too busy conversing with an enthralled group of locals. So she quickly put on the facade of a concerned friend and followed after him.

She soon found him collapsed by some bins at the back of the building. Smirking at the easy pickings, she rolled him over in search of his wallet.

Instead, she found a giant pool of blood.

Like a deer in headlights, she froze.

After several seconds, she finally realized, through the man's freshly bludgeoned injuries, that this wasn't Gil. Yet she swore she saw him go this way.

And, like a deer in headlights, she met her fate at the end of those few seconds, when two pairs of footsteps stopped behind her.

They took her kidneys and spleen.

From their second victim, they took his right leg below the knee.

The fourth one was difficult.

This one was a pig, no doubt, yet Will didn't notice the strands of dog hair until his knife was nicking the aorta.

Then he made eye contact.

As Hannibal held their victim in place, he immediately noticed the hesitation.

The job half-done, the stuck pig let out a garbled shriek. Hannibal reached for the hilt. With fingers firmly wrapped around Will's blood-streaked hand, he shoved the knife in and up, silencing their prey for good.

As hot blood streamed onto the pavement, the knife slipped from the gash and clattered within the puddle.

Gaze fixed to his own quaking hands and splayed fingers, Will staggered until his back hit the brick wall, and he sank to the floor.

Hannibal cast aside the deadweight. Stepping over the growing pool, he crouched beside Will and simply remained. After a long moment, those faraway eyes returned and flicked toward Hannibal's face.

Then, movements choppy, Will's right hand slowly reached out. Hannibal immediately took it and tightly enclosed it, blood and all, with both his hands. Will placed his left palm atop all of theirs.

His paddle to wage the storms.

Let it wash over you.

Now and forever.

This too shall pass…

And it did.

In time, Will's racing heart quelled. His hitched breaths quieted, and his shivering ceased. Muscles eased.

He was tired.

Yet he steadily rose to his feet and withdrew his hands. Standing over the vast puddle, he stooped to pick up the knife and wiped the excess blood on his pants.

Scarlet seeped into black.

Absorbing.

Disappearing.

Will took the dog-owner's heart.

Two more.

Will collapsed after the sixth.

The moment their car's trunk slammed shut on the final harvest, Will's knees buckled as if his strings were cut. Hannibal lunged forth and caught him with both arms wrapped firmly around his chest.

"Well done," he murmured in Will's ear, the first words spoken in hours.

Hannibal felt him smile.

Will was soaked from head to toe in blood. Hannibal eased him into the passenger seat. Slumped onto the black leather, Will's head rolled to the side. His eyes were blank and remained half-open. Hannibal's head tilted as he took in the breathtaking sight.

The scarlet was stark against pale skin and black stubble.

Regrettably so.

It was too noticeable.

Hannibal plucked the red handkerchief from his chest pocket. Leaning into the car, he supported Will's head with one hand and cleaned away with the other.

Will finally closed his eyes when the silk stroked along the edges of his orbital bones.

With most of the blood cleared from his face and neck, Hannibal pocketed the soiled fabric and fetched a towel from the backseat. He had Will briefly lean forward to drape it around his back before overlapping it at the front. Then Hannibal briskly headed to the driver's seat. As the engine started, he heard those words Will had once confided.

I'm alone in that darkness…

A call for help.

Tragically mistaken.

Tonight, Hannibal made sure to be there.

As Will trekked forth, ever deeper, into the unknown, Hannibal stayed with him.

Not leading nor following.

Company.

I'm here, beside you.

Right beside you…

He was careful to keep within Will's line of sight, to immediately reach back when Will did, to hold him steadfast and ground him.

He saw that tolerance become delight.

Water rushes into the deepening tide, bubbling and churning. Steam wafts through the stagnant air and obscures their ghastly reflections in the mirror.

Will's sodden clothes and towel lay in a heap on the once white tiles. With his sleeves rolled up, Hannibal gently guides Will into the bath. Will tenses at first, fearful the temperature was too hot. But as the rest of his body sinks beneath the surface, stopping at his neck, his head resting on the slanted edge, he closes his eyes and releases a quiet, content sigh.

Hannibal allows himself a moment to watch the first wisps of blood seep into the clear water. With the drain slightly open, water continues to pour into the basin, refilling as fast as it depletes. The constant churning sound, which subtly echoes off the tiled walls, also helps to mask their inner monologues, especially for Will, who Hannibal knows is still fully conscious despite the appearance of being asleep.

There's not an ounce of shame in the air between them.

For Hannibal, it was a relief when Will finally stopped counting. The tally didn't matter, since in the course of living together, the sight of each other's bodies was simply "familiar."

It started early on—as early as their beachside residence. While Hannibal was partaking in his morning shower, he heard a knock. After a pause, he said, "It's unlocked."

The door opened the next second and Will walked in.

"I'm going to the pier," he noted, while starting to brush his teeth. "Feel like seafood tonight."

Hannibal merely nodded once as he rinsed the soap from his shoulders. Only a layer of steam and a clear sliding glass door separated them.

As Will concluded his morning routine with a spattering of that atrocious aftershave on his bare neck, Hannibal exited the shower and first dried his face.

From barely a few feet away, Will stole the quickest of glances yet kept his expression neutral. "Want anything?"

Hannibal lowered the towel from his face and turned to look at Will.

And Will, in response, with no more excuses, no reason to be there, and nothing else to focus on, finally looked back.

Unapologetically.

With a grin, Hannibal began drying his hair and said, “Surprise me.”

By the following week, Hannibal noticed that Will began leaving the bathroom door slightly ajar while he showered.

Sometimes, Hannibal would take the invitation by stepping in to brush his teeth or return his bathrobe.

Was it a manipulation that they exclusively chose houses with only one bedroom and one bathroom?

Perhaps.

But they both did, in turn, and neither ever brought it up. It was one of the few things they mutually desired, and so, there was nothing at all to say.

Now, Hannibal indulges in the sight of water and blood washing across the smooth skin and muscled contours of his beloved’s body.

And his beautiful scars.

Yet Hannibal’s ministrations remain clinical.

Not a drop was shed from Will, yet Hannibal tends to him as if Will’s skin had been raked across coals. It’s reminiscent of their first session post the removal of Chiyoh’s bullet.

Yet the atmosphere couldn’t be more different.

In Italy, it was almost ritualistic—a last rites, in a sense.

Will, of all people, deserved to meet Death with dignity—clean, mended, and in clothes tailor-made for him.

Without pain.

Fully aware of how open and vulnerable he himself was in that moment, Hannibal was careful to keep him drugged. Had Will kept his senses, he could’ve manipulated Hannibal to do *anything*.

He was also aware of how Will had a knack for ending up in situations where he was at the mercy of others. It wasn’t so much masochism as it was simply relying upon the excuse to *not* act; he didn’t save himself by killing Hannibal, because he physically couldn’t.

He didn’t tell Hannibal that he loved him, because he couldn’t.

Yet, here they are again—another teacup reformed due to time and circumstance.

Will's mind is clear. Eyes closed, he's conscious and fully lucid.

He's letting Hannibal bathe him.

And Hannibal accepts this rare gift with the utmost sincerity. Without so much as a twitch of his lip, he uses Will's favorite, yet disdainful, mass-produced brands and reverently works the caked blood and stiff tangles from his untamable hair.

He sees Will's eyes flick and roll beneath closed lids while he firmly runs his fingers across Will's scalp.

As he rinses away the now maroon suds, those unruly curls begrudgingly cling flat to the contour of Will's skull, and Hannibal, in a heartbeat, sees him on that fateful rainy night in Baltimore.

Saltwater burning the alveoli of his lungs, he remembers waking up on the beach at the base of the cliff.

Washcloth in hand, Hannibal takes Will's arm and begins scrubbing away at the stubborn patches of blood. He spends the most time on Will's hands, clearing out the crimson outlining his fingernails and the creases in his palms.

—and half his wedding ring.

At last finished, Hannibal releases Will's arm and sets it back into the warm water. As he does, their fingertips accidentally catch for a moment.

Just for a second.

Yet it's enough for Will to slightly open his eyes and for Hannibal to freeze.

How would you do it?

With my hands.

A sheen of sweat upon his brow, Hannibal shuts off the faucet and fully opens the drain.

With Will wrapped in a bathrobe, Hannibal guides him into bed and then departs to clean their bloody path of destruction. His mind retraces their steps and begins plotting what chemicals would best suit which—

Will's hand catches Hannibal's wrist.

It can wait.

In response, the corner of Hannibal's mouth twitches. Self-preservation and practicality at the forefront of his mind, he tries to pull away. Yet Will tightens his grip. To anyone else, it'd be

painful.

Clean yourself and sleep.

Hannibal swallows. After a moment, he gradually eases the tension in his arm. Will loosens his grip in approval.

Anything.

"You could've made me do anything," Hannibal says aloud, only in their shared space.

His ethereal silhouette perfectly framed within the two-story window, Will stands with his flannel shirt tucked in and both hands in his jeans pockets. He peers through the blinding light.

Hannibal blinks at the sting in his eyes. "That's why I kept you sedate… *I had to.*"

Will's chest rises as he takes his sweet time with a deep breath and long exhale. At last, he speaks, and that distinct timbre of his voice is music to Hannibal's starving ears.

"Relax. I'm only returning the favor." Will casually turns, and on his face is a delicate smile through closed lips. "You're tired, Hannibal. I'll help you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow…" escapes Hannibal's mouth before he can stop it. Barely a whisper.

Will nods reassuringly.

All of them.

They belong to you.

Stepping over the drying streaks of blood and soiled laundry strewn across the floor, Hannibal takes a quick shower and then collapses into bed, hair still damp.

Utter exhaustion hits him like a long fall into the Atlantic. His heavy eyelids snap shut. But with the last of his strength, he reaches up and grasps Will's left hand, the tip of his thumb resting over the ring.

Will is already lost to deep, peaceful slumber. So there's no resistance when Hannibal draws their clasped hands to his mouth. He presses his lips across the top of Will's fingers—hardly a kiss.

Through the thin veil of artificial scents is the stubborn, persistent hint of blood.

At last giving in to sleep, Hannibal smiles.

He thinks about tomorrow—erasing their trail together, cooking together, dining together, and ending the day reclined in each other's arms.

He dares to hope for many tomorrows.

Chapter End Notes

“And all my bright tomorrows belong to you…”

Time for some tags to kick in.

Altair and Vega

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the morning of the seventh, Will awakens to an empty bed. Warm light filters in through a gap in the blinds. After rubbing his face and blinking away the lingering sleep, he rolls to his side and picks up the small white envelope centered on Hannibal's pillow.

Inside is a piece of quality cardstock paper. On the front are coordinates written in immaculate calligraphy, and this time, made with a real fountain pen.

On the back was a time:

23:30

"In Japan, the seventh of July marks a day known as *Tanabata*."

Will raised his eyebrows on the night of the sixth. He and Hannibal had decided to go for a walk.

Wind rustled the tall grass as they strolled side-by-side down the unpaved road. Towards the end, they could make out a few more stars, but the light from the nearby town still obscured most of their view.

—as planned by Hannibal, Will was sure. "I assume there's an epic tale behind it?"

With a brief smirk, Hannibal nodded. "Perhaps not on the level of the *Iliad*, but it *is* centered on devotion and love." He slowed to a stop and looked up at the vast night sky. Amid the soft indigo gradient were faint flecks of stars.

Hands in his pockets, Will glanced up as well.

"Do you know of the stars called Altair and Vega?" Hannibal asked.

Squinting at the somewhat hazy specks, Will gnawed at his lower lip. "Sounds familiar."

Eyes on the stars, Hannibal clasped his hands behind his back. "Residing on opposite sides of the Milky Way, they're among the brightest in the summer sky."

Will tried to follow Hannibal's line of sight, but he couldn't quite pinpoint the two or even the Milky Way.

"Their love is a forbidden one. The Milky Way is an impassible river meant to keep them apart."

“Except for the seventh?”

“Yes,” Hannibal breathed. “For just one night a year, a bridge forms, allowing them to cross and reunite in the middle.”

Will dropped his chin, the context solemnly slotting into place. He lowered his voice. “Is that how you see us?”

At last, Hannibal broke his gaze from the sky to stare at the end of the road. He took a deep breath of the cool breeze passing them by. Then, while avoiding eye contact, he said, “Our time together will never be enough…”

Will waited for him to continue.

…until it occurred to him that Hannibal never intended to.

Will sighed. “And yet, you’d like to believe.” He raised his voice to be heard through the wind and rustling grass. “…that we would find each other again.”

Hannibal blinked. “…I don’t see why not,” he answered, voice startlingly frail. “If you know where to find me…”

Will looked to Hannibal, eyes soft. Then he glanced away and scoffed. “You mean in the *Ninth Circle of Hell?*” he quipped, tone dripping with the utmost sass. “Chilling with *Satan* in his frozen lake?”

Hannibal smirked, and Will grinned as well. At last, Hannibal turned to make eye contact. “Do you believe in life after death?”

Will raised an eyebrow. “We getting existential now, doctor? Some *lazy* psychiatry.”

Hannibal smiled patiently. “Please, humor me.”

“*Well*…” With a shake of his head, Will shrugged. “I think I’d have to see it to believe it.”

“Fair enough,” Hannibal remarked, suddenly exceedingly confident. “Then I shall have to prove it.” He closed the gap between them with a step forward.

Amused and relieved to see that hellfire stoked in Hannibal’s dark eyes, Will grasped the nape of his neck and drew him close. With soft breaths caressing each other’s lips, Will smirked.

“I have *huge* faith in you, *Hannibal.”*

...I always have.

July 7th, 5:32 PM

“They’re getting *married*.”

The silence is filled with the incessant dull clacking of a laptop keyboard. Freddie removes her fingers from the tarnished keys and skims for any embarrassing typos.

Then she glares at her phone. “Hello? …Jack?”

But upon waking up her screen, she sees that the call has ended. Muttering curses, she hits the publish button on her latest article and switches over to another tab to check the results of her poll.

Are the Murder Husbands™ abstinent?

96 percent voted, “No.”

She grins.

Swiveling around in her chair, she stands up to peruse her wall of newspaper clippings, maps, and a spiderweb of red yarn and thumbtacks.

She rubs her aching temples. She was never one to lose herself to zany conspiracy theories, but *this one* couldn’t be more real. Despite no confirmed sightings, they’re certainly alive, that much is clear, and she’s convinced that they’re still here in Cuba.

Waiting for something.

“Their wedding. It *has* to be,” she mutters to herself. Hannibal’s pretentious ass would never settle for some random date, and so she staked out the usual spots on every potential night of literary or cultural significance. Next up is the Japanese “Evening of the Seventh.” Six days earlier, six bodies dropped, all in the same area.

All missing various organs or limbs.

Most of them were bounty hunters.

No doubt it was a fun night out for the murderous soon-to-be husbands. But it was strange how their kills became progressively sloppier. That sparked much heated debate across the internet.

Freddie squints at her grisly close-ups of number five and six. It was clear from the sheer brutality of the murders that these two seemed personal.

They were part of a small-time gang who were last seen vandalizing a truck a few weeks back. Somehow this must have majorly pissed off the cannibals. But there was no evidence that tied either of them to the truck.

Or maybe this has all been a red herring.

She can so clearly see Hannibal's cat-like, shit-eating grin and Will's cockily raised eyebrow, mocking her.

Freddie shakes her head in defeat.

Drowning in a plethora of flimsy evidence, unconfirmed sightings, and crime scene photos, she decides, with a heavy heart, to pull the plug on this lead.

All those sleepless nights for naught.

Donned in a flashy, extravagant summer dress, heels, and hat, she scales down the stairway from her unit and heads for her favorite little shop with a café cubano to *die* for.

As she steps onto the sidewalk, her eyes trail to the line of other stores along this quaint block.

One is a store for camping gear. Fly fishing rods are on sale. Another one specializes in fittings for bespoke windowpane suits. There's even a pet store with puppies for sale, though Will always seemed the be the "adopt-don't-shop" type—

"OW!" Freddie collides with someone whose eyes had been glued to their phone. The force knocks her to the hot pavement, along with her hat. "Ow, ow…*God…!*" Her blood boils as she picks up her sore body from the ground while the idiot makes no move to help.

Squinting through the sunlight, she raises a hand to block out the rays.

And gasps.

Will mother*fucking* Graham turns on his heels and runs.

In complete and utter shock, the words swerve and crash in the back of her throat before she finally shouts, "HEY!" Then her eyes flick to the unfamiliar cracked phone beside her. She grabs it and rushes to kick off her heels. "Wait!"

The locals gaze at the spectacle of a frenetic barefoot woman sprinting down the block in hot pursuit of a man.

"You forgot your *phone*, genius!"

At that, Will falters.

Exhausted, Freddie slows to a stop. "Oh God—" she blurts between coughs and heaving breaths. Then a shadow stops over her. She looks up.

Will stands before her with his right hand held out and a garment bag draped over his left forearm. "Give it."

After finally catching her breath, Freddie pushes back her voluptuous red hair and crosses her arms. "No."

Will's face twitches as he does his classic irked expression of parting his mouth and then closing it with a strained, smiley sneer.

God, how she missed seeing that.

"I've *killed* people," he hisses.

"Oh, Will…" Freddie sighs. "If you didn't kill me then, you're sure as hell not doing it *now.*"

Will sets his jaw. She can tell that he wants to hysterically laugh at yet another misfortune plaguing his sorry life…as well as snap her neck. "I'm not talking to you, Freddie." He takes an ominous step forward. "Where's the phone?"

"Someplace where you'll never reach." Her eyes flick downward for a second. "So I'd watch it, butter*cup.* You're one wrong move from me screaming and getting these townsfolk to dish out some sweet vigilante justice."

Will's eyes dart to the staring onlookers before clenching his teeth behind closed lips. "What do you want."

"Now *that's* more like it." She smiles victoriously. "Let's grab coffee and have a chat. Like old times."

Orange light filters in through the blinds, casting stripes along the walls and furniture.

Will steps out of Freddie's bathroom. The jacket and pants are a desaturated blue, perfectly fitted, with a pure white shirt, and ashen tie. His polished shoes are a deep brown, paired with dark charcoal gray socks.

Itching to grab her camera, Freddie raises both eyebrows in approval. Then she frowns. "I'd get rid of the tie. Looks odd on you. Too tacky."

Will sighs. Yet he studies himself in the mirror for a long moment before reaching up to undo the tie.

She huffs in amusement and then gets up with a start. "Oh, hold up." She stops behind him and fiddles with his jacket's collar.

—and slips a dime-sized tracking device beneath the lapel.

"There," she says, patting down the fabric. "Your collar was messed up."

Will tosses aside the tie and opens the top two buttons of his shirt. "The *phone*."

"Fine, fine…" she mutters, reluctantly drawing it from her breast "pocket."

He narrows his eyes as he takes it and heads for the front door.

“To be honest, I’m happy for you,” she calls from her seat on the couch. “*Both* of you.” Then, seeing Will pause, an idea abruptly hits her. “Oh, and before you go…” She hurries to her suitcase. “Would you like one for the road?”

“One of what—” Will freezes upon seeing the unfurled t-shirt.

Freddie smirks as she holds it—her top-selling Murder Husbands™ merch. In full color is a print of Hannibal holding Will’s head, thumb in front of his ear, their foreheads nearly touching. “Small, right?”

“Wh— What—?!” Appalled, Will crosses back into the room and grabs the shirt. “*How*—?!”

“Will.” Freddie crosses her arms. “I was *there*.”

Will blinks. “No, you *weren’t*!”

“Yes, I—” She refrains from completing that juvenile argument. “Well, *clearly* you were too distracted by Hanni’s eyes to notice me snapping photos from across the stable.”

Will grimaces. “What did you just—?”

“It’s a nickname the fans came up with. They’re a strange bunch, though I suppose that’s to be expected of people who ship *real-life* killers… But they sure are creative.” She picks up the discarded shirt. “Like see how you two are making a heart shape? I never noticed until they pointed it out—”

The front door slams shut in her face.

Staring at the chipping paint, Freddie smirks. Then she pulls out her phone and opens the tracking app.

Matthew stills from behind the corner as Will storms down the stairwell. He has to press a palm over his mouth to quell his bubbling excitement.

He had decided, on a whim, to swing by the area and pay that weasel of a journalist a visit. But it seems Lady Luck had other plans for him. As he was passing through, looking for a place to park, he saw *him*.

Now here he is, his old flame, just feet away.

Once Will exits to the street, Matthew closes his eyes and releases a slow, controlled breath. Rabid emotions in check, he buries his hands in his pants’ pockets and sets forth.

Time to hunt.

Will keeps to the busy main streets for several blocks. Then he abruptly cuts right to a quieter side street. Matthew ponders why until he spots the well-placed camera hidden near a tangle of telephone wires.

With an admiring smirk, he cuts right as well.

Then he freezes and ducks back around the corner.

This block is a straightaway. Narrow too. With no alleyways to disappear into, the houses here sit flush against the other.

No doubt Will is regularly checking his six.

So, Matthew decides to take the high ground. He crosses over into the next block and effortlessly pulls himself up the empty balconies. On the scorching rooftops, he quietly races across the buildings and catches up to Will.

Trailing him is a cakewalk from here.

At the end of the long stretch, he turns left. Just beyond the corner is a parked car.

Matthew reaches for his gun. He loads a barbed dart and aims.

Will jolts.

He immediately grabs for the vial piercing deep between his shoulder blades. But his fingers fail to grip it for two crucial seconds. With much force, he yanks out the dart and topples backward against the side of the car.

He hears someone deftly land on the pavement.

Panic melding with disorientation, he grips one of the knives in his coat and blindly slashes at the bleary silhouette. But the blade only slices through thin air.

Someone tsks, and he can't tell where it's coming from.

"*It's too late*…" that gravelly voice chides.

Suddenly, his legs are kicked out from under him, and the horizon flips. He gags as the wind is knocked clean from his ribs. The knife clatters against asphalt somewhere out of reach. Gasping for air, he rolls to his side.

He reaches for the phone.

And stills.

"Go ahead. *Call him*…"

He can barely make out Matthew kneeling and craning his neck to observe him.

—and each agonized shift in Will's emotions, realizing, as the drug takes root and spreads through in his veins, that he's a mongoose skewered by talons.

Writhing pitifully.

There's no escape.

On the verge of blacking out, Will grits his teeth and grabs the phone.

He throws it far.

The last thing he hears is a distant shatter.

White porcelain bursts upon the kitchen floor.

Will's shoes crunch through endless shards.

The poolside is littered with them. He eyes the luminous azure water as he passes by and toward the locker room.

Silent.

He drops to his knees before the altar.

There's not even a single drip; the blood stopped flowing long ago.

Of course he persisted to the very end.

Of course…

Footsteps race in, echoing throughout the hollow room.

Alana shrieks.

Too late.

"What have you done, Will?" is Jack, stern as ever.

Will hears sirens. More footsteps. The gavel strikes the table. Then countless hands drag him into a wooden chair.

The binds tighten—wrists, elbows, ankles, chest, stomach.

Finally, they strap the leather mask over his face, and he's relieved.

"Mr. Graham…"

—to not see him anymore.

“It’s time.”

Not like that…

Hannibal places his decaying hand upon the lever.

And pulls.

“Wake up.”

Will gasps and subsequently chokes. Staring into nothingness, there’s a split second of terror before he realizes his nose is clear.

His nostrils flare with each heaving breath. As oxygen returns clarity to his staticky brain, he blindly twists his head around and discovers that he’s seated upright, held aloft by two constricting lines across his torso. His arms are secured to the wooden armrests at two points —the wrist and elbow. His ankles are tied to the bolted legs.

A nearby chair creaks.

“Good mornin’, Mr. *Graham*,” Matthew drawls in his abrasive, lilting voice. Barely contained excitement laces every word. He scoffs. “Actually, it’s still the seventh. Don’t worry.”

Rage building in his throat, Will claws at the armrest.

“I always figured you and Dr. Lecter had a little somethin’ goin’ on. But not like *this*.”

Will jolts as fingers harshly grip his left hand. Matthew tugs the engagement ring off his finger.

“Very cute, this.” He huffs. “Your little rendezvous as well.” He removes something scratchy from his pocket and then flicks the cardstock paper so that Will can hear it.

Furious, Will thrashes. But there’s zero give in the restraints. All he accomplishes is bruising himself beneath the rope. He drops back with a shuddering exhale.

“Sorry for the mask,” Matthew murmurs, a ghastly smile in his voice. “While I *do* look forward to catching up, I really need you to hear me out first.” His shoes click atop concrete as he begins to pace.

He circles.

“Hawks may be solitary, but they *do* mate for life. That’s all very sweet, until a rival swoops in and *butchers* the other half. So what does the poor surviving hawk do?” He chuckles, overly giddy to relay the answer.

Will feels the ambient warmth from Matthew’s body as he leans in close. Voice lowered to a rumbling whisper, he utters each word slowly, mockingly.

“He *pairs up* with his mate’s *killer*.”

Matthew moves away. If it weren’t for the mask, Will would have bitten out his throat. He so viscerally fantasizes the rip of flesh and scalding spray of blood.

And Hannibal’s endeared reaction from across the dining table.

“It’s just nature’s way. And from a practical standpoint, it makes sense.”

Will hears the heavy metal thunk of a pistol being set on a table.

“If I kill Dr. Lecter, then he deserved it.” Matthew’s shoes scuff the ground as he nonchalantly paces. “Even *he* knows it’s only downhill from here. The old warhorse needs to be put out to pasture… But not *us*.” He softens his voice. “Time is still on our side, Mr. Graham.”

Then a bottle opens. Will’s blood runs cold at that scent.

“Kinda stale, huh? Must’ve sat around for too long, but I guess it’ll do.” Matthew pats copious amounts onto his own jaw and neck. “I’ve always hated this aftershave too. But if it works, *well*…”

With a eager chuckle, Matthew swivels on his heels and saunters away. A rusty door screeches and then slams shut.

Alone in his darkness, Will blinks from beneath the mask.

Then his tendons distend as he violently thrashes and twists. It’s all futile, yet he tries anyway.

He tries.

Then the agony compounds upon itself until it’s too much. His anguished cry is muffled by leather. In utter frustration, he slams his head hard against the backrest.

Chest heaving, he squeezes his eyes shut and finally dares to step back into that nightmare.

it’s not real it didn’t happen it’s not real it’s not this world

He repeats that mantra incessantly as he crosses back into that shard-ridden locker room.

Matthew eyes Hannibal’s dangling corpse with a crude coldness, contemplating which cut of meat he should consume first.

Will doesn’t look.

He keeps walking.

Row by row, the lights shut off until he’s left wandering blindly into the pitiless black.

Yet he hears the moment broken porcelain melds into the softer crackle of dirt, dried grass, and twigs.

The smell of freshwater rinses away the sterile stench of chlorine fumes.

“……there’s plenty of light……”

Wait—!

Tree trunks and gnarled roots dimly fading into view, Will quickens his pace after the sound of Hannibal’s steady footsteps through the Maine forest.

Yet when he arrives at the outcrop, it’s empty.

He vainly scans the midnight banks of the stream. The full moon ripples upon the rushing meltwater. He tastes the lingering coffee on his tongue.

Then a large, rounded fin—black stripes against bright orange—breaches the milky reflection.

Will watches the immense shadow of that spotted, serpentine monster grace the surface and then vanish into the abyss.

Beckoning.

His shoe splashes into water. Liquid ice soaks straight to his skin, burning. It sends a harsh shiver through his crumbling body.

But he keeps going.

Into the rising stream.

Holding her breath, Freddie peers into the dark warehouse. She listens for any signs of life as she creeps into the open with nothing but a taser and some mace.

Encouraged by the silence, she clicks on a small flashlight and flinches at the ghastly sight of a masked man tied to a chair.

But she instantly recognizes that asymmetric nose.

Unsure of what the hell she’s just walked in on, she stares at Will with a quirked brow.

Clearly, this isn’t the wedding venue.

—unless these two are way kinkier than she realized.

…

…

Then again……

"Will?" she whispers, tentatively touching his shoulder.

He doesn't respond, but she can see him breathing. With one last wary glance over her shoulder, she reaches around his head and unbuckles the mask.

She flinches upon seeing that his eyes are open.

"Whoa." She waves her hand in front of him. "You on drugs again?"

As the blinding flashlight obnoxiously stays on his face, Will finally blinks. His bloodshot turquoise eyes rapidly flick around before finally landing on her.

"Sorry," she says with an unapologetic smirk. "Am I disrupting something?"

Will squeezes shut his burning eyes. "Where's Matthew," he breathes out, voice hoarse.

She pauses. "…*Brown*?!"

"Just free my arm……*please*……"

Fully aware of his manipulative ways, she admits only to herself that this act is one of his better ones. Her eyes actually stung upon hearing his fractured voice—the abject sorrow and frayed desperation.

Almost genuine.

...right?

As quickly as she can, she saws away at the coarse rope with her trusty box cutter—first his wrist, then his elbow. With the severing of the final row of fibers, Will snatches the blade and cuts away at the rest. Free at last, he tugs off the rope and rolls the stiffness from his neck as he stands.

Freddie recognizes that look.

It's the part that lay dormant yet ever-present since the very first time she laid eyes on him—a starving wolf amongst sheep. She tried to warn them, but they all dismissed her findings as bullying or defamation.

So *what* if she's been sued for libel and settled six times?

This time, it's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And this is the truest part of Will Graham.

There's Death in his eyes.

After learning his own location and fetching the pistol, Will holds out his hand as he walks. "Keys."

He hears Freddie hurriedly sift through her cluttered purse and toss them. He catches the key ring without even looking.

Her heels rapidly click as she follows him out of the warehouse. "Hey, I know you've got yourself a murder groom to save, but *try* not to total the car. It's a rental—"

Will slams shut the driver's side door and starts the engine. Tires screech as he hits the gas and peels out onto the road.

Hurtling into the night, he sees rain begin to dot the windshield.

"Bad luck."

Will tries to shake free from this useless memory.

But he can't look away.

Cradling this wavering flame against the biting wind, he hears yesterday's self chuckle.

"Did you just say what I think you did?"

Hannibal grinned. "Unlike your fishing lure superstition, this one is not necessarily my personal belief but that of the culture."

Amused and unconvinced, Will lifted his eyebrows. "Which is…?"

"If it rains on the night of July 7th, the flooded river becomes uncrossable, and the two are unable to meet." Hannibal closed his eyes to the delicate drizzle.

Will watched the light mist dust Hannibal's hair. "Then the rain is also their tears."

"They mourn their missed chance."

The lost time…

The roar of pelting rain drowns out the memory of Hannibal's voice.

Will swallows back the rising dread. With a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, he dives back into his palace, grown vast over the years.

The second his shoed feet hit the marble floor, he breaks into a mad dash down the central hallway.

"*Hannibal!*"

Will's desperate voice echoes through the empty corridors.

I want you to know where I am…

…and where you can always find me.

He checks their shared rooms—the Norman chapel, their office, the Uffizi, Wolf Trap, Baltimore, the bluff, the beach—*all of them.*

But it ends the same as it always has.

Out of breath, Will drops to his knees in the moonlit sand. The roiling Atlantic lunges ravenously at the eroded shoreline, trying to reach him. He ducks his head and grabs fistfuls of his hair. "I don't *know*, I don't—!"

Suddenly, the ground surges up. Will is thrown to the white fiberglass.

Head throbbing, he planted his hands on the slippery surface. The floor lurched again. Will braced against the rush of icy saltwater.

…did you use the stars when you sailed the Atlantic?

Then, by some miracle he didn't deserve, the rain let up and the wind ceased. The waves evened. On his solo voyage to Europe, Will rolled to his back and saw a break in the clouds.

He stared in reverent awe at the heavens.

There were so many stars—dazzling, brilliant, *beautiful*.

He found Ursa Major. His eyes traced the ladle's edge.

He followed the path.

And there was Ursa Minor, and at the tail end…

Polaris.

"…that's all I know…" Will recites.

And yet, it's all you need.

Slipping and stumbling all the way, Will eventually reaches the mast. With teeth clenched, he cranks the handle and raises the sail. Harnessing the wind, the keel splits the sea with the North Star to his left.

He departs from that memory and enters a new foyer.

The obscuring storm dissipates and, with eyes unclouded, he basks in the timeless light of the universe.

Somewhere, there are worlds that aren't his. Yet on very rare occasions, the stars would align, and he can catch a glimpse of forbidden knowledge.

I looked up at the night sky there…

He hears one now—his own voice.

…I wondered if you could see it too.

Anything that can happen, happens.

I wondered if our stars were the same.

In another world.

Here, Hannibal turned to his right and smiled fondly.

"I believe some of our stars will always be the same."

They were seated side-by-side, an identically imperfect mirror of the other, curious if they could survive separation.

"You entered the foyer of my mind…"

Will turns at the sound of a gate rattling. Eyeing the exquisite insignia at the center, he curls his fingers around the iron bars.

"…and stumbled down the hall of my beginnings."

It gives with the slightest pressure. He takes a tentative step through.

Dancing upon the winter wind is a child's laugh.

Will hurries down the path. But as he crosses through the leafless woods and nears the courtyard, he stops.

And there, standing tall among the tombstones, is *Hannibal*.

Will's first instinct is to run to him, yet something warns him to refrain.

Completely silent, Will steps closer. Hannibal's back is to him, and as Will approaches, his beloved lowers into a kneel. He's holding something in front of him.

Will walks to the left to get a better view. As he does, the small headstone disappears from sight behind Hannibal's body. Upon reaching a new angle, he sees sharp points of fiery orange and indigo peek out near Hannibal's elbow.

Not daring to blink, Will moves further.

Then, just beyond Hannibal's broad shoulders is a flash of gold.

The grave is gone.

Mischa scurries up to him and eagerly admires her gift.

The wrinkles on Hannibal's face deepen with his smile. He delicately holds out the perfect bird-of-paradise. Glowing with innocence incarnate, she plucks the flower from his hands and gently cradles it to her chest.

Thank you!

Will shouldn't understand.

He shouldn't be seeing this.

And yet…

A mischievous sparkle in her eyes, she giggles. *You're not lonely.*

With hardly a twitch of his head, Hannibal nods once. "Not anymore."

Why? she asks, as only a child can.

A look of unfathomable adoration and pride crosses Hannibal's face. "I met a man." He smirks. "He's nothing like me, and yet…"

He can see you.

Hannibal nods.

And you trust him.

"Yes," he whispers, closing his glistening eyes.

But do you love him?

"I *do*," Hannibal breathes, the words fracturing as they leave his tightened throat.

Will startles at the sound of a twig snapping behind him.

Dark silhouettes emerge from the sea of fog and gnarled woods.

"Hannibal…" escapes Will's mouth, with hardly any air to back it.

One raises a rifle.

Will is about to dash forth when white hot pain sears through the scarred path that once nicked his femoral vein. He falls to the ground. Cursing and clawing at the dead grass, he glances back at the huntsman and then at Hannibal.

Don't forget.

Life is precious.

Hannibal…

Mischa has stepped closer. Trembling, Hannibal draws her into an anguished embrace and whispers his farewells. With the bird-of-paradise gripped in the hand resting on his back, she tenderly pets the top of his head with her other hand, as she would a cat.

"I won't," he weeps, curling his fingers into thin air. "*I promise…"*

The wilted flower falls into grass while Hannibal sits, resting the top of his head upon her name.

Upon *mylima.*

The huntsman aims. The breath catches in Will's throat.

"HANNIBAL!"

Standing at the altar in the ruins of a church, Hannibal—immaculately dressed in an ashen windowpane suit—lifts his head.

The draft from the open roof carries the promise of rain, and through the gaps in the crumbling walls, he picks up that much awaited scent of his beloved.

Yet it's not where he heard his voice.

He lifts his sleeve to check his watch.

It's 11:31 PM.

Will?

He waits, but there's no response.

Then, from behind him stroll the brisk, silent steps of socked feet.

A dagger gleams in starlight.

Chapter End Notes

Breath Fades with the Light

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional warnings:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will bursts through the rotting wooden door and races down the aisle. The church is empty, and yet all around him—

Blood.

Breaths quickening, he whips around and only sees more.

He smells it—dark stains upon the lighter wood.

On the walls, across the floor…

High impact spatter, streaks, smears, handprints—

A torn suit jacket on the altar.

It's 11:51 PM.

The ground quakes at Palermo.

As dust cascades from the spreading fissures, Will drops to his knees upon the dancing skull. Coated in ash, his hands roughly clutch the sides of his lowered head.

it's too late

too late

The world is ending.

Yet in this darkest hour, his stinging eyes catch a glimpse of a faint glow through the choking clouds and falling rubble.

With a quivering hand, he reaches out and picks up the cold silver.

Platinum.

Crouched within the silent ruins of the Cuban church, Will holds the unfinished promise in his open palm. Heavy drops strike his hand and wash away the dirt. Then more fall.

More.

The storm catches up to Will.

An eternal sob building within his throat, he shakily places his engagement ring back onto his finger and clutches his left hand to his chest. The precious metal scalds what it touches.

He knows what he has to do.

"You said you just interpret the evidence."

Tears slip from his eyes as he slowly closes them.

His curse.

His gift.

"So…"

He deepens his breaths. He forces them to slow, to fill the furthest corner of his lungs.

Steady.

He hears the thrumming rush of blood, and the once fleeing, breakneck beat of his heart…

Becomes a march.

To battle.

More tears slip down his face.

They mix with the flecks of blood by his knees.

"Interpret the evidence."

In endless darkness, a ray of brilliant gold casts upon his tearstained face. From beneath closed eyelids, he follows the pendulum.

Left…

Right…

Left.

Color returns to the world—*warmth*. He opens his eyes.

And steps back.

Right…

With each retraced footprint, shards become whole.

Left…

Drops of blood ascend from the ground—alongside the rain—as he passes by.

Right…

The crimson pool wanes. Upturned benches realign.

At the entrance of the church, he steps out of his shoes.

Left…

The stage is set.

Right…

And so, this teacup came together.

Left.

Will closes his eyes one more time.

Silence.

Time did reverse.

Focus locked to my target's back, I stroll soundlessly down the aisle. My skin reeks of that atrocious aftershave—a sheepskin, as foolproof as it gets.

Bared in my right hand glints steel that mirrors the constellations. Its honed edge hungers to bite.

I draw my arm back.

A half-second from death, he tenses.

Faster than what should've been possible, he turns. The blade pierces clean through his right hand, the hilt's guard catching at the center of his palm.

With the bloodied point erupting from the back of his hand and stuck mere inches from his neck, we stand locked in this stalemate.

In shock, I push harder, yet he boldly matches it with equal force. In his cold eyes is not even the slightest flicker of pain.

I withdraw the dagger in the same second he kicks out. His heel slams deep into my gut and launches me into the front row pews. The brittle, rotten wood snaps under my winded body.

From his place before the altar, he stands with his right hand dangling at his side, blood rapidly streaming from the hole in the center.

Eyes on me through his ruffled bangs, he uses his left hand to tug off his dark paisley tie and wind it around the wound. With his teeth, he pulls the knot taut. Pure, unfettered irritation crosses his face as he undoes the top two buttons of his shirt and shifts his gaze to observe the mess. A series of twitches grace the left side of his upper lip.

"Terribly rude, Matthew," he says, gracefully shrugging off his suit jacket, "crashing a wedding, especially one such as this…" He removes his cuff links and rolls up his sleeves. "Now what's to be done about that?"

I gasp to return the breath to my lungs, yet I'm far from fazed. Wild animals must, at all times, put up a facade of strength and perfect health, even when their guts are dragging behind them.

I know how to pierce that veil.

I slip the ring—that he, to my utter delight, has not yet noticed—from my left finger and toss it toward him. It bounces twice and rolls to a rest by his polished shoes. Yet he knew what it was before it even hit the floor.

Though his face did not change, I saw the moment his inner peace shattered.

I saw it in the way he froze. For a split second only, his entire body went completely rigid.

Time to twist the knife.

"He looked stunning," I tell him, rasping.

That's it, don't think.

"Of *course* you two wouldn't have settled for plain ol' white."

Give in. Let it blind you. Consume you.

My lips curl into a crooked smile. "Did you pick out that blue suit? Must've been so eager to see him."

I see his throat constrict. I know he smells *him* on me now.

Rage.

"I'm sorry I took that from you." I soften my voice. He has no choice but to strain to listen to my poison. He can't resist. He wants to know—he *has* to.

"But I get why you did the things you did…"

You think yourself a god when you're only a mindless beast like the rest of us.

This is proof.

The corner of his mouth twitches, and this time, it stays.

Revealing bared fangs.

Show me what you really are.

Show me.

A tear escapes Will's eye.

"……he suffered so beautif—"

I feel the jolt to the right of my ear—as violent as a gunshot. His knife sticks deep into the wood there.

I smirk.

He missed on purpose.

A second blade already in his left hand, he lunges. Tightening my grip on my own knife, I push off the splintered wood and meet the demon halfway.

Steel meets steel with nearly enough force to birth sparks. I grit my teeth against the shockwave that travels down my arm as the razor edges slip and lock hilts.

I watch his right. There's a small, full-metal blade pinched between his thumb and index finger. His left arm gives a little, sending me closer.

But I'm ready.

I duck backwards as the talon swipes for my throat.

Once, twice—

I withdraw my dagger and aim for his gut. Metal clashes as he blocks it. His right hand swings around, aiming for the distended tendons in my wrist.

I shove my body weight forward. As the small blade nicks the back of my shoulder, my elbow slams into his jaw and sends him reeling. The middle of his back hits the altar. He catches himself on the edge yet spins left as my knife stabs into the wood.

While I rush to yank free the blade, he flips his own knife in his grasp and swings outward. My dagger wrenches free at the last second, and I leap out of the way.

With the alter between us, he glares torture through mussed bangs. As we slowly circle it, I notice a spot of blood welling in the corner of his mouth. He wipes it away with the back of his hand.

Suddenly, he lunges forth. With his right hand braced on the surface, he vaults over the altar and lands behind me. I turn and trip backwards to avoid the vicious swipe of the knife.

Two, three—

I know I won't dodge the fourth. I see the diagonal blur whip across. Then a line of blood splashes across the wall. My back hits it the next second.

I raise my knife in time to knock aside his and then kick off the wall to drive my dagger toward him. He decides to twist on his heels and use that against me.

As my arm travels forth and then past him, he braces his shoulder against mine and redirects the momentum. My feet leave the ground, the world flips, and I'm sent flying into the right side's row of pews.

My body bounces when it hits the ground, and I roll out of sight.

While on my back beneath one of the benches, head reeling and with a long diagonal sting across my winded chest, I hear the click of his shoes approach. I make a gamble and wait a few seconds. Then I grip the plank above me and propel myself along the underside.

His right foot steps just inches from my face. So with adrenaline flooding my veins and the knife held backwards in my left hand, I jab for his ankle.

The blade slips clean through his Achilles tendon.

And oh, did *he* feel *that*.

Before I can reach his left ankle, he leaps out of view. Elation crashing over me, I scramble to my feet and lunge.

I see that he's dragged himself onto a bench. He thrusts forth the knife in his left hand, but I catch his forearm and slam my knee in and through the back of his elbow.

I hear the satisfying snap. His arm goes limp, and his knife clatters on the floor.

I win.

I glance up to witness his reaction. Instead, I notice that his right hand is empty.

Something hits my face. The left half of the world goes black.

Staggering back, I blink but it doesn't clear. Then I feel water rapidly dripping down my cheek and off my chin. Some of it leaks into my mouth. There's salt.

Tears?

I lift my free hand to my face.

My fingers brush something.

I touch it again.

It's stuck deep.

Ah.

A strangled laugh escapes my throat.

I whip back toward him. But the bench is empty aside from a smeared puddle of fresh blood.

Knuckles white around my dagger's handle, I kick aside benches and scour each row. But he's nowhere.

"*Lecter!"* I call, my voice echoing through the ruins.

I spot his abandoned knife not far from where I crippled him.

I can't believe it. The bastard failed to kill me, and now he's fled.

Gone to find a quiet place to die.

With a scoff, I return to the altar. The blade in my eye is giving me a migraine. So I fetch his neatly folded jacket and lay it flat across the surface.

I cut out a long strip, which I then bite while extracting the blade from my face. The coated metal clatters and splatters between my feet. Then I press his wadded handkerchief to the wound and tightly bind the makeshift bandage around my head.

The eyepatch secured, I return to the entrance of the church and step back into my shoes.

I decide to head back to the scene of the crime.

Not only is there no discernible trail, but there's no way he could've made it to the front doors in that short amount of time. There are no other exits.

Then I hear a faint beat.

A distant, steady drip.

My remaining eye flicks to the blood collecting in the gaps between the floorboards.

Of course…

I wedge my fingers into the edge of the nearly invisible trapdoor. This time, I'm careful not to stick my face into the line of fire.

But there's no flash of a blade, and from my angle, I can see a smeared streak of blood leading deeper into the basement.

With every muscle tense and ready to react, I slowly scale down the dusty concrete steps. My fully dilated eye picks up the fuzzy silhouettes of broken vases in the darkness. Then I notice

rows of large rectangular indentations in the walls.

My fingers brush over the center of one, revealing engraved text beneath the caked dust and cobwebs.

It's a crypt.

Smirking, I slowly venture to the bottom of the stairs. The hall opens up to the right. Oddly enough, I feel a soft draft. Then, upon rounding the corner, I find him.

At the very end of the corridor, his broken body rests under the light of the universe with his upper back reclined against the sculpted concrete. High above is a chasm. Its jagged edges frame the Milky Way, which shines unhindered in this remote location.

A fallen angel.

I stroll along his trail of blood and drag marks through the dust.

His eyes open at the sound of my nonchalant footsteps, and he slowly lowers his right hand from his lips.

Clutched between his thumb and forefinger is a thin silver ring—a mirror image of the one I stole. I crouch beside him and see noble acceptance in his stoic eyes. So, I let him keep it.

I brace my left palm on his sternum and feel the rise and fall of his steady breaths.

I feel the powerful thump of his heart.

"The Queen demanded proof when she sent me," I tell him, setting the point of my dagger at the center of his chest, just below the join of his ribs. "I'm glad they stopped me the first time. I've long dreamed of doing this—"

I dip the point until it pierces through his waistcoat, shirt, and skin. Then I readjust my grip and roughly pull the blade down and right, along the edge of his rib cage.

Scarlet rapidly spreads through split fabric.

He didn't flinch or cry out. There wasn't even a single hitched breath or slightest twitch in his face.

Incredible.

I cast aside the dagger and slowly sink my fingers into the gash. Scalding blood cascades over my hand, coating it.

Then, at last, I see the slightest bit of tension in his jaw. His breath catches.

As I press on further, I feel cold drops hit my face. They dot the ground, and there's an odd burning sensation in my vision.

But…

Why?

This is not my design.

As dark clouds close off the heavens, Hannibal's focus suddenly flicks up from my embedded hand.

We lock eyes.

Then, through rain and the watery distortion, I see that cold, unfeeling mask fall away.

And beneath that armor is…

Recognition.

Fond and tender and warm.

Love.

Hannibal…

He slowly reaches out with his empty right hand. His blood-caked fingertips delicately trace the path of my tears.

Along my scar.

They won't stop falling.

He smiles.

"Hello…

"*Will*."

Matthew whips around just as Will plants his hands on his collar and yanks him off of Hannibal. The side of Matthew's head smacks against the concrete floor, stunning him.

Will walks over and shoves him onto his back with his foot. Then he steps over him and pins Matthew's biceps under his knees.

Both hands clenched into white knuckled fists, he beats him until the writhing ceases.

He doesn't see the wendigo.

Not anymore.

With bruised, bloodied knuckles on both hands, Will grips Matthew's head. He pulls off the eyepatch and slowly drags both thumbs over his eye sockets.

As Abel Gideon once did to a nurse, he presses in. Yet, unlike that imposter's detached brutality, there's pure malice behind Will's cruelty.

A sadism.

Justice.

Righteous.

But he doesn't dwell.

Can't.

He hears ticking.

Amid the pouring rain.

With both hands braced on Matthew's jaw, he clenches his teeth and twists.

After the loud snap, all is quiet.

Will releases the corpse and struggles to his feet, wobbling like a newborn deer. He hurriedly staggers to Hannibal, tripping over his own feet as he goes.

Finally, Will drops to his knees in the pooling blood and rainwater. He immediately clamps both hands over the gash.

"Hannibal…"

His eyes are closed.

"Hey." Will adjusts his grip and presses in harder with his left hand. With his right, he reaches up and gently brushes the side of Hannibal's face. His stained fingers paint scarlet lines across his cheekbone.

Hannibal's eyelids weakly flicker open. For Will's eyes only, he lets his agony read plainly from his furrowed brow, gnashed teeth, and sporadic, shuddering breaths.

Yet he musters a half-smile.

And Will can't help but reflect him.

With his paisley tie still wrapped around it, Hannibal lifts his right hand and rests it over Will's left. He feels the reclaimed engagement ring through the slick blood and rain.

"Take it…" Hannibal wheezes, grimacing, every breath a fight.

I want you to have it.

He presses harder, urging Will's fingers beneath his skin.

"Please…"

Will…

It's yours…

It's yours.

And as their rain-drenched hair and clothes lie flat against their bodies, Will does consider it.

He imagines sinking his hand deep into Hannibal's chest cavity.

The scalding warmth.

Cradled by his lungs and ribs, his fingers close around the fragile, broken, beating heart…

Pulling, crushing the life from him…

And Hannibal would be honored, if not enraptured, to die in such a way.

With my hands.

He'd be grateful.

Comforted.

It'd be beautiful.

……and then what?

Will curls his fingers into his palm and pushes down hard over the severed vessels.

The dripping slows.

Hannibal's smile disappears.

Yet Will huffs and reaches into his own jacket. Tucked away by the inner lining of his lapel is a small pocket.

Hidden.

"If you thought you could get out of marriage *that* easily, think again," Will says, fishing out Hannibal's wedding band. "I've waited too damn long for this…"

…and I know you have too.

As best as he can, with his one hand available, Will works it onto Hannibal's left ring finger. His left arm rests at an odd angle.

Hannibal's eyes glisten as he watches. Then he removes his right hand from Will to pick up the discarded ring by his side.

Will loosens his grip on the wound for just a moment. Yet Hannibal takes his time reverently sliding the ring onto Will's finger.

The hidden magnets lock the two halves together and complete the image Will has long since suspected. It matches the design he had chosen to be engraved on the inside of Hannibal's "plain" wedding band.

Ouroboros.

Of two intertwined snakes.

Will chokes back a sob. Chest heaving, he quickly forces himself to stamp down that unbearable ache. Finally, his breaths even out, his throat eases…

And he speaks.

"I, Will Graham…take you, Hannibal Lecter…to be my husband…"

My beloved.

He applies even more pressure, still feeling blood seep past. Hannibal winces yet keeps quiet.

"To have and to hold…from this day forward…"

To honor and treasure you…

He sees Hannibal's focus begin to wane.

"For better or for worse, for richer, for poorer…"

To be at your side in sorrow and joy…

The moment Hannibal's chin drops, Will quickly reaches out to support his head. Hannibal's distant eyes blink open at the touch. His pupils find Will.

In good times and bad.

"…in sickness and in *health*…" Will swallows. He can barely speak. "…to love……"

……and cherish you always.

"From this day forward—"

He can hardly see Hannibal through the distorting tears.

But he has to say it.

And so, he leans in until their foreheads touch.

Barely a whisper amid hitched breaths…

Will promises.

"……'til death do us part."

With unrelenting rain cascading upon them, Will tilts his head and presses his lips to Hannibal's parted mouth.

Hannibal doesn't kiss back.

But he would have, if he could.

Will knows because he's here beside him, hand in hand, over their *memento mori* in the Norman chapel.

Whole and untarnished.

They've found each other at last.

Hannibal smiles. Eyes closed in warm daylight, he contentedly rests the side of his head against Will's. Yet he feels the quiver of his newly-wedded husband silently weeping against his shoulder.

Consumed by empathy, Hannibal dips his head and murmurs, so gently:

My dear Will……

Only until our next appointment.

Will snaps open his eyes.

"Hannibal…?"

This time, his eyes don't open when Will touches his face.

Yet he can still feel him breathing.

He still feels that stubborn heartbeat—timid and fluttering, like a bluebird's wings.

Will squeezes shut his eyes, more tears dripping off his jaw, and leans forward to press the sides of their faces together. Nuzzling against Hannibal's limp body, he cries.

He allows himself this moment.

He lets the mournful sobs rip unbidden from his throat.

He lets the roiling Atlantic crash over him.

…because he knows the storm will pass.

Even this.

Forever borne against the current.

He takes his paddle, raises the sail, and aligns himself with Polaris.

Find a way.

Adapt.

Endure.

Evolve.

Survive…

…Become.

As soon as Will senses a break in the winds, he seizes this rare gift and rushes to close every door in their palace.

All of them.

Their office, the Norman chapel, the Uffizi, their houses, the cliff, the beach, Hannibal's first smile for him in Jack's office—

And here.

He closes the doors on everything.

Locks them tight.

Yet he tucks the key safely over his heart.

He'll be back.

We'll be back…

With one last glance over his shoulder, he departs from their cherished, vast memory palace.

Sitting among the abandoned graves and tightly clutching his unconscious husband, Will realizes that all is silent.

He opens his dry eyes.

The rain has stopped.

He lifts his head.

And through the break in the black clouds, he sees them—brilliant, dazzling, and beautiful.

Altair and Vega.

At 11:59 PM, they crossed the flooded river.

Chapter End Notes

It leads you here, despite your destination
Under the Milky Way tonight

▶ Click here for additional notes:

Ouroboros

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Locked in a dark room and illuminated by the harsh spotlight above, Freddie—in a loud leopard print dress—checks herself in the two-way mirror. Finally, the observers on the other side can no longer stand it, and the door opens.

Perpetually tired, Jack seats himself across from her and leans back with a heavy sigh. “Only *you* would dress up for an interrogation,” he mutters.

Freddie sassily crosses her legs. “Well, one has to look good for the paparazzi.” She smirks. “Speaking of which, fancy seeing you here, all things considered.”

He nods. “By request of an interested party.”

“Smart. Compared to some random agent, I’d say we have plenty of catching up to do.”

Jack gives her a strained smile. After another sigh, his eyes flick to the stack of papers in his hand. “Let’s take it from the top—”

“Oh, it was *terrible*, Jack,” she bemoans like a melodramatic noir movie star. “When I became a hostage in my own apartment, I thought I was going in the soup for sure!”

Realizing this is going to be one of “those” days, Jack narrows his eyes. “But then he left.”

“Yes, it was a miracle.” Eyes closed, she daintily places the back of her hand on her forehead. “He spared me on the condition that I continue to tell their story.” Dropping the act, she opens her eyes and smirks. “It’s just as we’d always say—all psychopaths are narcissists; they *love* to read about themselves.”

“Including your *theories* on their favorite positions?”

Freddie smirks. “They really ought to thank me for the inspiration.”

Jack stares. “So then, instead of calling police, you followed him.”

“It was part of our deal,” she lies with a smug look. “Seems they were in need of a wedding photographer.”

Jack blinks. “But then he ends up getting kidnapped.”

“By Matthew Brown of all people!” Freddie glances over at her snide reflection. “I don’t know how you managed that, but when the public finds out…” She tsks while shaking her head. “I honestly think your best option is a cover up.”

"…You *freed* Will." Jack tosses aside the papers and leans over the table. "You ought to be *charged* for aiding and abetting."

"I was *manipulated!*" Freddie glances away. "Actually, if I'm being honest here, I can see how he was able to trick you time and time again. Once he puts on that sad wet puppy look, it's *over*. I bet Hanni feels the same."

Jack squeezes shut his eyes against the headache. "So he steals your car, and *yet again*, you follow him instead of calling police."

"I would've gotten there faster if the taxi driver wasn't so adamant about ripping me off." She sighs. "Also, I'm a firm believer that the purest form of journalism is merely documenting and *never* intervening no matter what. Like a wildlife photographer."

"You *freed* him."

"—*manipulated!*" She crosses her arms. "Anyway, by letting nature take its course, your little problem nearly took care of itself."

Jack leans forward and clasps his hands upon the table. He lowers his voice. "How bad is it?"

Somber, Freddie stares at the center of the table. "I mean, *you* saw the photos… Things were touch and go for a while."

"And you *helped* them."

"I was *threatened!*" she corrects. "And I'm not even exaggerating there. I mean, he had a gun, but he didn't outright threaten me. …But he didn't have to! Hell hath no fury like a murder husband widowed."

Jack has to nod to that. "Just give us a breakdown of the injuries, and we'll let you go."

Freddie lowers her brow. "Y'know, instead of wasting taxpayer dollars flying me back to Quantico, it would've been *way* easier to just *buy* a one-month subscription. Hell, I would've given you a ten percent discount—"

"Was he gutted?"

She bites her lip to hold back the joke. "No, but his abdomen was sliced open, up near the center under his ribs."

Donned in a surgical mask and bloodied gloves, Will meticulously threaded the curved needle and pulled taut the suture. The section of split skin closed up neatly, as Will's own once did over his stomach. It gently rose and fell with each breath.

"I only drove them back to their safe house," Freddie added. "Took a while to stop the bleeding. Was sure it was a lost cause, but of course Will didn't think so."

"And how was he?"

She chews her lip.

"Drive."

Freddie fumbled to catch the keys. As she rushed to the driver's side, it did occur to her that she really ought not to be helping them. With her hands on the wheel, she frowned at the grisly sight of her ruined nails.

It was somewhere around midnight. After taking an ample amount of crime scene photos, she had ventured into the open trapdoor and straight into drama. Will had ordered her to apply pressure to Hannibal's wound. She watched him hoist Matthew's body over his shoulder and scale the steps back to ground level.

For all her teasing of his stature, she was well aware of his strength. Him returning to pick up Hannibal was yet another example.

Of course, it was only fair that she let the world know.

Pulling out into the pitch black, muddy road, she paused and dared to ask, "…Where?"

A phone loudly landed on the dashboard. After recovering from the initial shock, a tiny plastic disk—her tracker—suddenly hurtled by and bounced off the inside of the windshield. In pieces, it landed somewhere on the floor of the car.

With a sigh, she picked up Hannibal's burner phone. On it were the GPS instructions. It was muted, and she knew better than to remedy that.

After positioning the phone in front of her, she angled the rearview mirror to face them.

"We already know this, but I can't emphasize it enough." No longer smiling, she glances back at her and Jack's reflections. "You can't just kill one." Then she overlaps her hands on the desk and leans in close to the mic. "And under no circumstances can you *only* kill Hannibal Lecter."

Jack gives her an empty half-grin. "You think Will is more dangerous than Hannibal."

"I've been warning you all about that demented mind for years." She sighs. "So hear me out now before it's too late. You have three options: kill them both, cage them both, or let them go."

Jack slowly reaches over and switches off the mic. Eyes downcast, he sits in silence for a moment before stating, "You already know which option we're vying for." Then he gathers the papers and rises from his chair.

Freddie narrows her eyes at his subtle yet smug grin. Truly, she has no idea where he gets that confidence from.

Jack pauses in front of the door. "By the way…" He reopens the manila folder. "We found him."

Noting the singular, she blinks. “Matthew?”

Jack tosses the photo onto the table. It slides to a stop in front of her.

Freddie’s eyes widen ever so slightly as she takes in each ghastly detail.

Pale skin stark against the dark rock, his arms were tethered by the wrist to the back of the cliffside boulder. Likewise, his bruised head had been pulled back so that gravity on his slack jaw gave the appearance of an eternal scream. From his empty eye sockets were tears of black dried blood streaking down his face.

You play with fire…

Birds of prey could be seen circling in the distant background. As if to hit home the mythical connotation, he had been stripped aside from a blood-soaked white sheet draped across his pelvis. It served to frame the focal point of the tableau—a gaping, torn chasm in his abdomen where his liver should have been.

You’re gonna get burned.

“*Prometheus*,” Jack corrects.

This is my design.

“You’re one of Jack Crawford’s…aren’t you.”

“Mr. Brown, my name is Miriam Lass.” She smiled emptily. “May I speak with you?”

With fluid, lion-like motions, Matthew pulled himself up into a seated position on the thin, striped mattress. “Have you taken back your life yet?”

It was the second day of spring.

At the deafening silence, the corner of his mouth twitched. “Guess that’s a ‘no.’” His eyes never left hers. “Y’know, you’ll never be a real agent. Too unstable.”

Hands folded over the clipboard of papers on her lap, Miriam leaned back into her chair. “Let’s cut to the chase. You’ve been offered a deal—”

“I’ll take it.”

She glared. “…Mr. Brown—”

“*Matthew*, please.” He placed a hand on his chest in mock distaste. “Mr. Brown was my *father*.”

"—you're going to die."

With a chuckle, Matthew leaned back against the painted brick wall and straightened his legs. "What do yah think I'm doing *now*, Lass?"

"*Miriam*."

He smirked. "You're wasting your breath. I already know what you want. But my question is, 'To whom do I owe my thanks?' Certainly not the messenger."

With a nod, she exhaled slowly. "Alana Bloom is married to the last surviving member of the Verger family. She's also the biological mother to their heir."

Clearly recalling that hapless, goody two-shoes woman, Matthew raised both eyebrows. "*Well*, I ain't saying she's a gold-digger…"

"Hannibal Lecter has since vowed to kill her. So now that he's escaped, she and Margot Verger have posted a $50 million bounty on their heads."

He perked up at that last part. "'*Their*'?"

With a faint yet grim smile, she nodded. "Him…and Will Graham."

To her, it only felt like yesterday when she first met him. He was the only one who so thoroughly empathized with her. He understood and related to her.

She had hoped they could reconnect and heal together. But shooting Dr. Chilton threw a wrench in the works. By the time she was deemed fit to return to society, Mr. Graham had already left the country.

On a sailboat.

"Apparently those two are an item now," she muttered. "I also heard that you once considered yourself a 'friend' of Mr. Graham's."

Matthew sneered. "Oh, that Will Graham…" He glanced up at the ceiling. "I always figured murder was his love language…even when I was slicing open Lecter's wrists." Then he drops his head with a sigh. "Shame he has to die."

"Actually, Mr. Graham's condition is that he may be taken alive." Eyes downcast, she hesitated for a split second before adding, "…so long as he never poses a threat to the Verger-Blooms."

Matthew stared, unblinking. "And me?"

"If it means the latter, then consider yourself pardoned." Miriam lowered her voice to a murmur. "All the public will know is that you escaped."

A crooked grin slowly stretched from ear to ear on his gaunt face. "With friends like these, who needs enemies?" Glancing away, he chuckled. "To think him and Bloom used to have a

thing for each other…"

Sensing their time nearing its end, Miriam stood and nonchalantly set her chair aside. "What'll it be, Matthew?"

Eyes on the opposite wall of his cramped cell, he stared for a moment before suddenly leaping up and grasping the metal bars. The guards at the far end of the corridor glanced up at the sound.

Yet Miriam was unfazed and took a few steps closer.

Past the scuffed white line.

"Hey!" they shouted from down the hallway. "Ma'am!"

She stepped even closer until their faces were barely a few inches apart. His striking green eyes bore directly into her soul.

"What does she *want*?" he whispered, one word at a time, barely audible through the barking of the guards. Person suit cast aside, not a hint of playfulness was left.

She met his gaze unflinchingly.

"A reckoning," she told Miriam, eyes on her vast estate. In the lush green fields, her son and wife played tag with her dog Applesauce hot on their heels. She smiled softly at them before turning to meet Miriam's eyes.

Gone was the warmth, replaced by the pitiless darkness that Hannibal had instilled in all of them in his destructive wake.

No guilt. All petulance.

He would be proud.

"And the proof?" Miriam asked.

Alana grinned. She was aware of the eternal cycle, as well as her inevitable role in it. She knew the risks—the dire consequences—and yet she felt no fear.

With everything to lose, she refused to simply wait for Death to come knocking.

It was fine time for her to stake her claim.

After all, Hannibal—with his love of whimsy and fairy tales—would no doubt appreciate the sentiment.

Leaning even closer, Miriam lowered her voice to a seething whisper.

And, perhaps, with enough convincing, Will would too, one day.

"Bring back his heart."

7:27 PM

Flecks of snow gently float down from the night sky. Through the window, a blanket of glittering white coats the outside world. Yet the quiet comfort of his dining room is shattered by that desperate plea.

"Please don't lie to me!"

"Garret Jacob Hobbs is dead. You killed him. You watched him die."

"—what's happening to me?!"

Hannibal watches from Abel Gideon's seat. Yet as Will's quaking intensifies, he drops his focus to his own hands on the table and fiddles with his wedding ring. Twisting it around his finger, he feels the faint engraving of two consuming snakes on his skin.

The sound of whimpering is not as easy to ignore.

"He's had a mild seizure."

"That…" Hannibal swallows. Then he glances up. "That doesn't bother you?"

His past self shoots him a cold, warning glare. *"I said it was mild."* He silently sets aside Will's gun and takes his seat at the far end of the table.

Hannibal glances at Will's weakly quivering body.

"Are you the man who claimed to be the Chesapeake Ripper?"

Hannibal sets his jaw, feeling the seething heat of anger begin to rise. "Why do you say 'claimed'?"

"Because you're not." He says accusingly, almost mockingly. *"You know you're not, and you don't know much more about who you are beyond that."*

Hannibal stops fiddling and curls his fingers into his palm. “I know that he’s changed me, the way I’ve changed him.”

His past self sighs. *“A terrible thing…”* Morose, he slowly turns to face Will. *“…to have your identity taken from you.”*

“No, not taken.” Hannibal stands and crosses around the table. He takes Will’s arm, and with a gentle hand on the back of his neck, guides him into a nearby chair. Hannibal seats himself in front of him. While holding Will’s head, he checks his temperature, eyes, and then tenderly brushes the sweat-drenched bangs from his face.

Although still unconscious, Will instinctively leans into his touch—grateful. And Hannibal has to swallow back the constricting lump in his throat.

“…Evolved,” he tells himself, closing his eyes.

He flinched when Will abruptly sidestepped and draped a heavy arm over the back of his neck. The end of their scenic forest hike within reach, Will had put on a brave face as they marched toward certain death.

He asked Hannibal to review their zero-sum game.

Then he removed his arm, dramatically steepled his fingers, and took a deep breath. “See, if someone were to keep track of how many times one has wronged the other—of which I *have*, in fact, been keeping track—then this person would *clearly* see that *you* still have a lot of making up to do.”

Will played it off with levity, but he was right.

“Then why?” Hannibal inquired on their second evening at their Cuban beach house.

Will had tended to him that entire day—cooked for him, catered to him, guarded him. Yet Hannibal, unable to deny his burning curiosity, pressed for an answer.

“……because it’s you*.”*

His past self would’ve reeled at the slap to his face. Yet his evolved self knew better; this wasn’t a lashing.

It was the honest truth.

“If our lives were to end right this moment, would you regret it?” Hannibal asked, delicately.

“No,” was his immediate response. *…I’m happy.*

Hannibal smiled. *Then so am I.*

Will lowered his hands from his eyes, exhaustion yet tentative relief written plainly on his face. But the slightest bit of shame worked its way into their newfound peace.

Hannibal quickly reassured him.

"Please don't lie to me," Will implored beneath a sarcastic, teasing facade.

Standing before his empty dining room fireplace, with snow cascading outside his window, Hannibal draws this figment of Will into a hug. He curls his fingers into the fabric of Will's jacket and places a hand on the back of his head.

"Never again, Will," he murmurs, softly and achingly sincere. He tightens his grip and turns his head into the nape of Will's neck.

He breathes in that fevered sweetness.

"…I promise."

Will sighed.

Someday, perhaps, this teacup will come together.

Piece by piece.

Shard by shard.

In darkness, a short line of gold seeps through the center of Hannibal's right hand, which is still buried in Will's hair. On his left, bone clicks back into place.

It'll never be what it was.

Another luminous line strikes across the back of his right ankle.

Yet it's still beautiful.

A third fissure traces down along the inner left edge of his ribs.

…if not even more so.

Time didn't reverse for this particular teacup. No, it ceaselessly and ruthlessly marched on.

With a promise to heal all wounds.

"Just promise me," Will murmured under his breath, *"that if you're ever caught…you'll never give up trying to escape."*

"Of course," he vowed. Swaddled in insulated hiking gear and their combined sleeping bags, Hannibal tightened his embrace.

"Good." Will nodded. He shifted closer as the biting cold mercilessly rattled their tent. At last, he allowed sheer exhaustion to drag him into a well-deserved sleep.

... ‘cause I’ll be waiting.

Kintsugi.

Hannibal opens his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

What goes around, comes all the way *back around*...

Sins of Omission

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

7:30 PM

Hannibal stares at the unfamiliar ceiling. A fan lazily spins above. He watches it while his vision resharpens. From a gap in the right side curtains, wisps of dust waft through a ray of golden light.

He swallows, or at least tries to. Sandpaper scrapes together at the back of his throat.

Coughing, he lifts his right hand and observes the bandage neatly wrapped around it. Fresh. He notices that all the blood has been cleaned away as well.

His lip twitches as he curls his right fingers. Beneath the pull of stitches is a sharp ache which yanks him one step further from his daze.

He casts off the thin sheet from his body and glances at the white bandage around his chest. As the sheet slips off the side of the bed, he sees that his right foot has also been wrapped tight and elevated on a pillow. He's also in a new pair of boxers.

Mercifully, there are no insulting patterns this time.

Alone, he strains to roll to his side. The blood is slow to reach his brain as he sets his numb left foot down onto the carpet.

The IV line secured to the back of his left hand softly clatters against the nightstand, knocking off a pen. He instinctively catches it and pauses.

Blinking, he tentatively bends and rotates his left arm.

Merely a dull ache.

The corner of his mouth perks for a millisecond.

Not broken; it had only been a simple dislocation.

After setting down the pen and disconnecting the IV, he braces against the wall. He finds out quickly that he's unable to bear any weight on his right foot, so he stubbornly hops toward the ajar bedroom door.

It creaks open to a small, drab living room.

A motel.

The cheap carpet is darkened by several layers of residual grime. Bits of dirt and the hollow shells of dead bugs litter the corners. Whatever remaining floor space is occupied by their open suitcases and cardboard boxes of essentials.

Collapsed on the frayed couch at the center of this mess is a disheveled, sweaty man. Wearing only a tank top and boxers, he rests in a heavy sleep with his mouth parted and a line of saliva dripping through his ratty beard.

And Hannibal couldn't be more in love.

Half hopping, half limping, he crosses around the coffee table and drops to his knees beside the couch.

Seized by utter exhaustion, his husband doesn't stir in the slightest. Hannibal plucks a clean napkin from the coffee table and wipes away the spittle.

Then his eyes flick to Will's bandaged knuckles and then to the purple-green bruises striped across Will's wrists, elbows, and ankles—proof of his devotion, his wrathful fight against the ropes.

Unable to resist, he reaches out and tenderly brushes the bangs from Will's forehead, fingertips grazing the raised scar. With his left palm, he cradles the side of Will's head and rests the side of his own head on the edge of the cushion.

For once, Hannibal lets this sleeping dog lie.

Time stretches along with the shadows until their small shelter is encased in dusk.

Then just as Hannibal is about to slip back into unconsciousness, he feels Will stir.

Hannibal removes his hand and leans back as Will takes a sharp breath and claws himself free from his dreams.

His eyes open.

Hannibal smiles and, though his voice is quite hoarse, perfectly emulates that tone:

"Good evening, Will."

Will abruptly pushes himself upright and reaches for the lamp. With a click, warm light floods the small room and briefly stings their dilated eyes.

Will flinches.

He doesn't breathe as they stare face-to-face for several long seconds. Then he abruptly covers his mouth and turns away. Eyes squeezed shut, he takes a deep breath through his nose and harshly swallows back some sort of outburst. Slowly lowering his hand, he clears his throat and finally murmurs, "…what time is it?"

Hannibal grins. “Nearly nine o’clock.”

And Will can’t help but smirk. “I assume you didn’t just drive an hour and a half to find me?”

With a soft chuckle, Hannibal lowers his head and closes his eyes.

And Will fetches the key from around his neck.

Crossing through the waiting room, he removes his hand from his pants pocket and knocks on the door.

Hannibal opens it the next second. “Please, come in,” he says, stepping aside with refined yet barely-contained glee.

Will saunters in with the knowledge that Hannibal has always sneaked a whiff whenever he passed by.

As Hannibal closes the door, Will stops in the center of the room and crosses his arms. He surveys the damage—a shattered windowpane, water stains, leaf litter, and scattered papers.

As if nothing’s wrong, Hannibal unbuttons his jacket and takes a seat in his miraculously untarnished chair.

Sighing, Will lowers his head. “You’re taking this well.”

Nonchalant, Hannibal crosses his legs. “What is there to take?”

With bits of glass crunching beneath his shoes, Will peers out the shattered hole in the window. The night breeze softly ruffles his styled hair.

Hannibal watches him. “All in all, superficial, wouldn’t you say?”

“It’ll take a long time,” Will murmurs, “to fix this.”

“And that upsets you?”

With his back still to Hannibal, Will flashes a resentful smirk. Then he turns. He glares at Hannibal yet keeps his voice soft. “You *begged* me to kill you.” He wrinkles his brow. “You remember that?”

“In retrospect, perhaps the timing wasn’t the best.” He pauses. “…for you.”

Will nods as he walks over and drops into his chair—also untouched. He *doesn’t* cross his legs, as always.

Hannibal flicks his eyes up to meet Will’s. “Yet you once fantasized about killing me in this very room. In that very chair.”

“Not once.” Holding Hannibal’s gaze, Will exhales through his nose. “And enough with changing the subject, you asked what’s upsetting me and I’ll *tell* you.”

Already well aware of the answer, Hannibal places his hands on his lap and faces the music.

Will lowers his voice to nearly a hiss. “You *let* him *win*.”

“Not entirely.”

“I was *there,*” he snaps.

“And I recognized that.” Hannibal glances away. “In the end.”

Will swallows. “As dying, you’d leave a message for me.”

Hannibal nods. “Now you see, in the event of my murder…” He lifts his chin and locks eyes with him. “I will *always* die by your hands.”

The corner of Will’s mouth twitches. “And that comforts you?”

“And you.”

Will leans forward until his elbows are resting on his knees. “You once persuaded me to *live* and *thrive* in the event of your death. Turns out, you’re a god*damn* hypocrite.”

Hannibal parts his mouth but says nothing for a full second. Then he states curtly, “I was worried you were dead, and then I happened to lose the fight.”

“*‘Happened’?”* Will scoffs. “So you’d rather claim you’re losing your touch.”

Hannibal smiles softly. “Age claims us all, in the end.”

Will massages his mouth and grumbles, “It’d be a goddamn miracle if *either* of us even makes it that far.”

“Additionally…” Hannibal clicks his tongue. “He *did* nearly get the drop on me, as it were.”

“By serving you a taste of your own medicine.”

“Jack once did the same.” Hannibal shifts in his chair. “Not the aftershave bit, but it seems I’ve started a trend with the socks.”

Will runs his hands down his face. “I gotta find a new aftershave—”

“I don’t see why,” Hannibal interjects. Then he quickly adds, “—when it’s only a matter of picking up the same brand or wearing a sheepskin of your clothes.”

Will smirks but refrains from commenting.

Thankful, Hannibal reflects him. At last, he glances at the shattered window and debris strewn across the damaged hardwood floor. “This is yet another storm we’ve weathered and survived.”

“I shudder to think what the rest of the palace looks like.”

“Not to worry,” Hannibal assures with a soft grin. “I’ve been tidying up in your absence.”

“Tidying, huh?” Will mutters dryly. Then he fiddles with his ring. “Would you say things look…‘different’ now?”

“Yes,” Hannibal admits, pensive. “While I dearly cherish these memories, I missed speaking to the ‘real’ you.”

Will chuckles. “Because you can’t *predict* the real me.” Then he raises both eyebrows and mutters under his breath, “…even now.”

Hannibal microscopically narrows his eyes. But before he can inquire, Will plants both hands on the armrests.

“*Anyway*—”

He abruptly stands up from the motel couch. Hannibal’s eyes widen for a split second when Will grabs Hannibal by the biceps and tosses him onto the couch.

“I need a shower,” Will mutters, first heading toward the kitchen. “Unless…” He bites his lip. “…you wanna go first?”

Hannibal grunts as he pulls himself upright. “No, go ahead,” he rasps.

Will returns with a disposable plastic cup of water, which Hannibal takes with gratitude. Will watches him desperately drink, Adam’s apple bobbing with each gulp. “Then I hope you’ll join me for dinner.”

Hannibal finishes the last drop. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He grins warmly. “After all, I need to regain my appetite.”

Will smirks as he retrieves the empty cup. “Even for leftovers?”

“Certainly.” Hannibal pretends to contemplate for a moment. Then a vicious petulance briefly passes over his eyes. He clears his throat. “Anything left of your hawk?”

And so, upon hearing that another one of Matthew’s organs was missing, Alana knew all too well what it was and what became of it.

Heart tartare.

She so vividly remembers those simple cursive letters as he plucked that notecard from his unassuming recipe book.

With a sigh, she scans over the freshly farmed hearts laid out on two silver platters. She wonders, dimly, if they still held warmth, were she to touch them.

“These two,” she says with a nod to the leftmost ones. The butlers dip their heads and vacate the room.

From across the vast lavish bedroom, Margot chuckles. Reclined upon the silk sheets, her eyes never leave her phone as she endlessly scrolls.

Alana saunters over and collapses onto the opposite side of the bed. She simply rests for a moment with her weary eyes closed and hands over her middle. Finally, she mutters, "What."

"Oh, you know…" Margot perks the corner of her mouth. "It's *petty*. But I like it."

Alana huffs. "I knew it wouldn't have been that easy."

"They're a slippery bunch."

"Slick as hell…"

Margot finally sets aside her phone. "You should've seen the look on his face when I told him about my 'one night stand.'" Pensive, she stares at the ceiling. "Wasn't expecting that he'd be so…concerned."

Alana smirks. "And yet, you still told him about the pregnancy?"

"I didn't see the issue." She shrugs. "He was the only psychiatrist I ever had…who I could *actually* spill my guts to. That development seemed tame compared to everything else we'd discussed."

Alana dimly wonders if she ever meant the same to any of her own patients. "Well, I think it helped that he hated Mason's guts."

Margot wrinkles her brow. "So why do you think he ratted me out? …Jealousy?"

"I'm sure that played a part."

With a scoff, Margot shakes her head. "Pregnancy aside, it really wasn't anything to write home about." She smirks. "Even if I *were* into men."

Alana briefly raises her eyebrows. "Yet add genuine connection to the mix—on *both* sides—and…who knows…" Eyes still closed, she sighs. "I doubt they know either."

Margot rolls onto her side to face Alana. "…Is it weird that I'm not worried?"

Tired, Alana hums. "No, it's *logical*." Then she chuckles dryly. "Speaking of logic, or lack thereof, Jack told me this morning that he's already booked his flight to Cuba."

Margot turns back toward the ceiling. "So, would it be weird if I said…" She holds her breath for a moment. Then, as an exhale, murmurs, "……I think you should go."

Alana snaps open her eyes. Then she sits up. "*What?!"*

Margot stares. "What?"

Alana gawks. "You *want* me to *go*?"

Only slightly put off, Margot blinks. “Y’know, he may have been *way* weirder than me, but he did have a point.”

Alana squints. “That I deserve to die?”

“That you need to do this for yourself. It’d also be more therapeutic.” Margot closes her eyes and smirks. “And as you said, it’s illogical to be worried.”

Biting her lip, Alana flops back down onto the bed and drapes an arm over her weary eyes. They lie in silence for a long while.

Comfortable in her patience, Margot simply waits.

“I still think about that night.” Voice frail, Alana intermittently tenses at the memory of every crash of his body against that pantry door. “To think…it all could’ve ended right there.” In the darkness beneath her covered eyes, she sees the sights of her gun lined up with his forehead.

She had practiced, and she was ready.

She had resolutely chosen the world where he died in his own kitchen.

I took your bullets.

Fingernails digging into her palm, she lowers her arm and punches the mattress. Taking in a sharp breath, she whispers, “I just want this to *end.* Jack clearly doesn’t, but I do. More than *anything*…”

Margot opens her eyes. She observes Alana for a long moment and then retrieves her phone. “Hey, have you seen this?” she asks, unlocking it. Then she turns it aside and hands it over.

Alana blinks.

Beneath the obnoxious Tattle Crime watermark is a composition befitting of an over-the-top movie poster. Will—drenched in rain and splattered with blood—exits the crumbling chapel with the broken body of his bride in his arms.

Like some sort of biblical renaissance painting, there’s not a hint of emotion in his downcast eyes as he looks over his fallen love.

In the light of the camera flash, she sees the gleam of their wedding rings through the coat of blood.

“Seems Will finally has what *he* wants…” Alana mutters, handing back the phone. Margot sets it aside.

What follows is Alana’s own words—her own medicine—yet with her beloved’s sultry, defiant spin to it.

“Then it’s time you got what *you* want,” she says, reaching over to brush her knuckles across Alana’s cheek.

She closes her eyes as those fingers delicately trace down the contour of her jaw. In the darkness, those heavy footsteps of her hunter morphs into the innocent footfalls of their son racing up the stairs to see them.

In a minute, he will excitedly knock on the door to announce that dinner is ready.

It was all so fragile.

So precarious.

Nuzzling closer, Margot drops her chin to press their foreheads together and says:

“…with your *own* hands.”

Plastic scratches against the papery surface of a disposable plate. Yet as inglorious as it is, Hannibal doesn’t seem to mind.

In fact, he’s supremely pleased.

Yet the faintest inkling of regret tries to worm its way into Will’s psyche, but he immediately stamps it out.

What’s done is done.

“I would’ve thought tartare would be too *harsh* on a post-op stomach,” Will notes.

Although they had to bid farewell to the decently equipped kitchen at the guest house, Will made sure to pack as many cooking-related items as he could.

But he realized hours later that, in his haste, he had forgotten to pack any silverware or plates.

“As I said,” Hannibal reminds, “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Will scoffs between chews. They dine in silence for a long moment. Hannibal’s left arm now rests in a makeshift sling crafted from a wrapping of gauze.

Finally, it was time.

“Seems like years ago,” Will muses, “but Alana once told me that you reminded her of a cat.”

Hannibal keeps his eyes on his food as he speaks. “Because I value dignity?”

“Because of the way you smile and your knack for playing with your prey, but yes.” Will sips from his plastic cup. “I’d say dignity is a big one.” He pauses. “Wouldn’t you?”

Hannibal pauses as well. "…Yes."

Briefly lifting an eyebrow, Will nods. Returning to their meal, they descend into a tense silence once more.

Then Will grabs his cup and washes down his last bite. Hannibal watches him resoundingly set down the flimsy plastic and lick his lips.

"I'm going to remember this," Will begins.

Rather cryptically.

Hannibal looks at him. But getting nothing, he briefly wrinkles his brow and takes the bait, albeit reluctantly. "Remember what."

The corner of Will's mouth perks for a millisecond. "That after all was said and done, I found myself with a *lot* of time on my hands. A lot of time to think… Speculate… *Scheme*…"

Hannibal sets down his plastic fork. "Why have you *again* vacated our memory palace?"

"Not vacated." Will rubs the back of his neck. "Just, uh…stepped out. For a sec."

With his brow somewhat furrowed, Hannibal minutely lifts his chin. "I assume you have good reason to."

Eyes never leaving Hannibal's face, Will nods. "Oh yes…"

"Will." Hannibal's upper lip twitches. "This is quite a lot of sins you're racking up."

"And you have no idea what I'm omitting, do you?" Almost pitying, Will slowly shakes his head. "But you will…"

Hannibal sets his jaw. "What—"

"*See*, shortly after sewing your chest wall together, I came up with a little theory."

Hannibal watches Will clasp his hands over the flimsy dinette.

"And then I decided to test it."

"What theory." Hannibal averts his eyes, in a vain attempt to hide his burning curiosity.

…but mostly his fury of not knowing.

Will leans forward and lowers his voice. Ominous, he slowly utters each word one by one:

"That you'd *never* allow yourself to *die* un*dignified*."

Then he reclines into his chair and drapes his arm across the back. "That's it."

Hannibal instinctively shifts his plastic knife with the tip of his ring finger. "You tested it…"

“Yep,” Will remarks, glancing toward the bedroom. “Funny how things hide in plain sight.”

Hannibal glances toward the bedroom as well, eyes rapidly scouring for the tell.

Then his focus lands on the nightstand.

And he freezes.

“As I was saying, I think a little incentive would do you good, Hannibal.” Will crosses his legs. “Sometimes we just need a fire lit under our ass, every now and then.”

Eyes never leaving the nightstand, he recounts Will’s series of puzzling, off-putting expressions throughout the entire evening. Then he swallows. “You shouldn’t have done that, Will…”

“Oh, you *finally* figured it out?” Uncrossing his legs, Will leans forward and overlaps both forearms on the table.

With barely contained whimsy.

“Then tell me, Hannibal…”

And unparalleled sass.

Relishing each and every second, Will stares at him unblinkingly. Then, as a sinister, snide whisper, he asks:

“What’s new, *pussycat?*”

Hannibal jumps up and half-stumbles, half-dives into the bathroom. Right hand gripping the edge of the sink, he looks into the mirror.

And *sees*.

Chapter End Notes

⩾^•ω•^⩽

Their marriage is off to a *fine* start.

(and yes, he used a Sharpie)

The Point of No Return

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To be Will Graham, one has to take the victories—as well as the subsequent spoils—whenever the depressingly rare opportunity arises.

And throughout the period of his life known as “After Hannibal,” Will has since learned to leap at them.

In the gap to the left of the turquoise loveseat, he adjusts a petulantly gilded frame on the blood red wall. Then he takes several paces back and massages his chin.

In the background, Hannibal pretends to wipe the dust off his spotless office desk.

“Does this look straight to you?” Will asks.

With a sigh, Hannibal walks over. He unbuttons his jacket before seating himself.

Of course, the portrait is in perfect view from his chair.

He sighs. “When it comes to us, can anything be considered on the ‘straight and narrow’?”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s a little off,” Will notes, tilting the frame counterclockwise by a fraction of a degree. Then he steps back and grins. “There.”

As Will contentedly takes his seat, Hannibal squints at the most insulting “photo” he’s ever had the misfortune of laying his eyes upon.

While he stared in frozen shock at the crudely drawn whiskers on his cheeks and the upside-down triangle on his nose—along with two tufts of hair that had been gelled into pointed “ears”—Will waltzed in and hooked his arm around the back of Hannibal’s neck. With a deadpan expression, Will gave a thumbs up with his left hand and made eye contact with his reflection.

—thereby searing this cursed memory into their minds forever.

Yet despite his eternal grudge, that infectious empathy soon leaks into his psyche and causes the corner of Hannibal’s mouth to perk. “You seem happy.”

“Because I am.” Will beams. “Is that really so odd?”

A begrudgingly endeared look on his face, Hannibal stares off into the warped distance of their past. “While I strongly disapprove of your methods, I’ve long since hoped you’d reach this point. Free of inhibition.”

Glancing away as well, Will sighs. “Feels…*fragile*.”

“Only at first,” Hannibal reassures. “Eventually, you’ll forget what it was like to always be looking over your shoulder. It’ll be easy to forgo the pull to seek judgement from those who can never know you… Only then can you unabashedly delight in that wickedness.”

With a smirk, Will turns back to face Hannibal. “The point of no return.”

Hannibal meets his eyes and smiles. “This is your Becoming.”

“And…” Will slowly closes his eyes.

……it’s yours.

The flood-damaged floorboards remain thoroughly scuffed and warped, yet the leaves, papers, and bits of glass have all been swept away. A piece of plywood covers where the broken pane once was.

At the end of the week, Hannibal removes the sling from his left arm.

In full agreement that the motel didn’t count, it was Will’s turn to pick their next abode. Per usual, he relayed no details—only that he’d made his choice. From the passenger seat, Hannibal watched—albeit a bit dazed from his latest round of painkillers—as they departed from civilization and concrete. Farmlands, with crops nearing harvest in the iron-rich red dirt, race by in perfectly parallel rows.

Two hours in, Will abruptly pulls to the side. Hannibal assumes for a “break,” but then the passenger door opens.

Will holds out his hand from which dangles a black tie. “Put this on.”

Dressed in a gray sun shirt, Hannibal gives him a look before picking it up. “I assume not in the ‘usual’ way?”

Will merely closes the door with a smirk.

Although Hannibal could have strategically placed it, he decides to play along and completely enshroud his eyes. He hears Will huff in amusement as he closes the driver side door and restarts the engine.

Taking a backroad, the dirt path snakes up along an incline. Hannibal’s inner ear paints a picture of the hillside—steep and seldom traveled.

Then the road evens out, and all is smooth-sailing for a good half hour. Although the car windows are closed and the AC is blasting, Hannibal can still detect the scent of lush greenery—uncut grass, palm trees, a forest.

Freshwater.

The car decelerates to maneuver a hairpin turn, and the climb resumes once more. Hannibal shifts in discomfort at the endless bumps and jolts aggravating each aching wound.

Finally…

After an exceedingly torturous 22 minutes and 54 seconds, Will puts the car in park and removes the key.

Hannibal reaches for the blindfold.

But Will's hand catches his wrist. "Wait."

Irritated, Hannibal lowers his hand and resolves to wait exactly one minute more. The door opens. Sunlight hits Hannibal's face, and a warm breeze floods in. Will unbuckles the seatbelt.

"C'mon," he murmurs, taking Hannibal's right arm and guiding him out of the car. Hannibal is careful to keep the weight off his right foot as he steps out onto the grass. Then Will drapes Hannibal's arm over his shoulder and places his left arm around Hannibal's back.

Together, they hobble some fifteen-odd feet before Will stops, swivels them 32 degrees counterclockwise, and then yanks off the tie.

Hannibal winces at the near-whiplash and onslaught of blinding light.

But his pupils soon constrict, and with the dimming of the brightness emerge rich emerald hues and a vibrant blue sky.

Hannibal blinks.

They're standing at a small grassy clearing at the top of a hill, high in the mountains. Under the shade of a lone tree, Hannibal limps forth from Will's side and braces against the smooth trunk.

He stares.

Far below and reaching for the horizon are verdant plains divided by crisscrossing lines of trees. The shadows of clouds mottle the landscape as they lazily pass by. Bordering them towers the rest of the mountain range. Their edges, worn sharp over eons of rainfall, slice and funnel the white cotton clouds. From the rightmost one, almost out of sight, cascades a waterfall.

Hannibal can see the approaching wind—a series of shimmering ripples sweeping through the plains. He closes his eyes as it arrives. Stubbornly fighting through the sharp ache in his stitched chest, he takes a deep breath.

From several paces back, Will observes the sight of the summer breeze brushing through his husband's graying hair. Sunlight filters through the rustling leaves. It dances across his skin in star-like speckles, and even from this angle, Will can tell.

Hannibal is smiling.

Down an incline some fifty yards away is a cottage-like house.

Will is careful to plant his feet sideways on the grass as they haphazardly descend. “We could just *drive* there,” he grumbles.

But Hannibal shakes his head.

So when they at last make it to the porch, Will dumps him at the doorstep and tosses him the keys. Then he trudges off to the fetch the car and all their belongings.

Hannibal pulls himself upright and unlocks the door. The interior is simple and clean—dark wood features, warm beige walls, and polished tiled floors accented by elegant rugs of tropical flora.

Through the spacious windows flood natural light. Using the walls and counter for support, he wanders through the modest kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom.

To the left of the king-size bed sway beige curtains that stretch from the ceiling to the floor. He pushes it aside, revealing a sliding glass door. With effort, Hannibal heaves it open and steps onto the patio-like balcony.

A lookout.

And from it, a perfectly framed view of the waterfall.

He watches the rainbow-tinged shower flow ceaselessly into the sapphire basin, which drains into a winding river. The rapids disappear behind the tree line and into the forest’s heart.

With both arms leaning on the wooden railing, Hannibal stares.

And loses time.

“Amazing what water can do,” Will says, strolling out onto the creaky weather-worn planks.

Blinking on his way back to the present, Hannibal nods. “The mountain is eroding.”

Will stops beside him. Eyes locked on the waterfall, he shoves his hands into his pants pockets and leans his weight on his left leg. His eyes follow the free fall of white water.

Some of it misses the rocks.

The rest shatters into a burst of droplets.

Will lowers his head.

...Soon to be lost to the stream.

Shame and dignity are fickle things when it comes to Hannibal.

The man can be stripped, branded, and strung up in a pig pen without so much as a care. But confiscate his toilet or “Sharpie” cat whiskers onto his face, and only the virtue of being Will Graham can save you now.

And so, he noticed when Hannibal stopped drawing.

Specifically, Hannibal refused to create any art since their wedding night.

—since a dagger sliced through his dominant hand.

As he was wont to do, Will slipped out of bed in the dead of night and rifled through their drawers. He only did it after a several-hours-long supply run into town. But upon finding nothing—nothing new in his book of paintings and every unsharpened pencil and pristine scrap of paper accounted for—Will returned to bed and sat on the edge.

His right hand inevitably gravitates toward his left, and he twists his fused ring round his finger.

> *“...it helps keep me mentally alive—like exercising is to the body, lest one’s muscles waste away.”*

Will glances over his shoulder.

His husband is sleeping soundly. Today, on the final Sunday of July, Hannibal had—on his own volition—attempted to tackle that fifty yard hill. Yet the very act had brought this fallen angel to his knees.

Hannibal clutched his chest as he braced with his quivering left arm and heaved into the grass.

Upon realizing Hannibal was nowhere in the house, Will muttered a slew of curses as he rushed outside and raced up the hill. But by the time he reached Hannibal’s side, the righteous fury had dissipated to a quiet solemnity.

“C’mon,” Will said between breaths. He extended his hand.

Beads of sweat trickling down his face, Hannibal looked up at him through the stifling, blazing sun. Then he reached out and took Will’s hand with startling conviction.

A reverse of their time on the yacht, the day had come when Will had decided to set aside Hannibal’s handcrafted crutch. Hannibal had watched, with clinical detachment, as Will had braced against the deck’s railing.

Will took a step with his bad leg and practically spasmed forward. The next attempt was no better. With an embarrassed, defeated sigh, he twisted back and reached for the crutch.

Hannibal grabbed it and held it just out of reach.

“Try again.”

Will glared at him. He lurched for the crutch, but Hannibal quickly stepped back.

“You’re ready.

“Try again.”

Thirty yards up the hill, Will wrapped his left arm around Hannibal’s back and placed his right hand on Hannibal’s hip. Hannibal braced his right palm on Will’s shoulder, and they hobbled back down to the house.

As Will feared, progress has been excruciatingly slow.

Or perhaps it wasn’t, in reality.

Hannibal certainly gave him no indication either way.

But he sees, loud and clear, in those tired eyes, that his husband knew better than to give voice to the obvious request:

When the moment comes…

Save yourself.

Will you do what needs to be done?

Kill us all.

And Will did fantasize.

Sometimes with a knife, sometimes with his bare hands.

As the world caved in around them, Will would write the final chord of their achingly beautiful duet.

In the lingering solo would be no greater pain.

No sweeter sorrow.

With a heavy sigh, Will returns all of the untouched art supplies and lowers onto the bed. In the darkness, he watches the blur of the ceiling fan cycle endlessly.

After a long moment, he rolls to his right and places his left hand on the side of Hannibal’s face, cradling it.

“Hey,” Will murmurs, shifting until his forehead is nuzzling Hannibal’s temple.

Eyes closed, Hannibal takes a sharp breath and tilts his head toward him. Toeing the line between dreams and consciousness, he grumbles incoherently.

Will chuckles and fleetingly presses his lips to Hannibal's cheekbone. "You listening? We're going out tomorrow."

"…you?" he asks, groggy from his latest dose and still refusing to open his eyes. Instead, he takes a deep breath through his nose and sighs, every muscle easing and reassured.

Will smirks. He slowly trails his left hand down Hannibal's neck, through the coarse tangles of his chest, and last tracing the rough line of stitches beneath his ribs.

"You and me."

It's 7:03 PM.

…and Hannibal Lecter has parked his ass.

Will narrows his eyes. "It's too late. You're *going*."

But Hannibal merely glares death at the dashboard and holds his ground.

This time, they're both immaculately donned in true "black tie" attire.

And fake beards.

Yet that doesn't stop Will from leaning into the car and grabbing him by the lapels. And true to his nature, Hannibal decidedly does *not* go quietly into that good night.

He buckles his seatbelt.

Scowling, Will tries to reach for the button, but Hannibal blocks him by twisting over it and digging his right elbow into Will's chest. He even kicks out with his left foot.

Against the onslaught, Will grits his teeth and dives in until only his shoes are sticking out of the car.

"Get *out*, you stubborn *fuck!"*

Heads turn and then quickly glance away as the two tussle and subsequently rock the car for a good minute.

Finally, Will wrestles himself free. Breathing hard and hair in disarray, he abruptly whips out a knife. Before Hannibal can react, Will—with a delirious, feral look in his eyes—lunges in and pins Hannibal to the center console.

Seconds later, the seatbelt is in three pieces.

Perturbed—yet intrigued—onlookers again turn away when Will re-emerges from the car and slips the pocket knife back up his sleeve. He then plants his hands on Hannibal's coat and yanks him out of the car and into the awaiting wheelchair.

As Hannibal halfheartedly struggles to right himself, Will fetches a pair of sunglasses from the glove compartment and then slams the passenger door shut. The car beeps as he locks it.

At last more or less resigned to his fate, Hannibal begrudgingly remains still as Will places the black sunglasses over his fuming eyes. Then Will smooths down the wrinkles in Hannibal's tuxedo and peeling fake beard. He also straightens the bow tie before hurriedly attending to himself.

After molding back his hair in the reflection of the car window, Will checks his watch.

7:22 PM

He sighs.

So much for being early.

When they first pulled up to the venue, it took all of Will's mental strength to deflect the look of utter heartbreak and betrayal that crossed Hannibal's face.

I let you know me—

Shut up.

"You haven't even seen it, have you," Will mutters as he begins to push. The wheelchair noisily rattles over the rough asphalt.

"Why would I have *seen* it?" Hannibal snaps. "It's a mockery."

"It's a *classic*." Will rolls his eyes. Then he smirks. "I bet you're gonna cry."

Hannibal says nothing while they wait in line.

—that is, until he can no longer stand Will's off-key humming.

"I take it you've seen it?"

"Over two decades ago," Will notes. "Curious how I'll view it now…"

Hannibal eyes the lecherous banners adorning the theater's entrance. Yet Will's genuine excitement inevitably defuses him, and he can't help but slightly blunt the edges in his tone.

Still, he remains petulantly bitter. “You claim this reminds you of us.”

“In a sense.” Will chuckles. “You’ll see soon enough.”

Hannibal pushes the sunglasses up the bridge of his nose. “I thought the story was that I *can’t*.”

Will abruptly veers Hannibal through a small pothole. Then he briefly puts on a smile while handing over their tickets. Inside the lobby, he uses Hannibal to effectively slice their way through the throngs of people. Meanwhile, Hannibal’s upper lip twitches each time someone bumps into the wheelchair.

At last, they arrive to their box seats. Will parks Hannibal ahead of him to his left and settles into the red upholster chair. Although the steep angle obscures some of the stage, they have this small space all to themselves.

After scanning the audience for danger, Will at last allows himself to admire the interior design. The newly reopened theater has a quaint, yet bright and heavenly feel. Adorning the grand ceiling are paintings of clouds on a vibrant morning sky. Where the sun should be is an ornate gold facade from which dangles a large, permanently fixed, crystal chandelier.

The anticipation is palpable in the audience’s eager murmurings. With Hannibal being a downer, Will deflects the negativity by letting the people steer his empathy and even enhance his own enthrallment.

He checks his watch.

7:30.

Will kicks back and relaxes while the lights dim and the audience hushes.

The curtain rises.

A gavel strikes.

The words are in Spanish, of course, yet he still recognizes and bristles at each mention of *that* name.

He had completely forgotten about that “other” Hannibal.

After the first taste of that foreboding motif, all eyes avert to the large tarp printed with the number of the beast.

The auctioneer gives his final announcement. Then the covering is yanked away as the fallen chandelier is set ablaze to the blaring of those iconic organ chords.

Will glances over and, from his angle, catches behind the black lenses a flicker of intrigue crossing Hannibal’s eyes.

Will grins.

In a heartbeat, he sees a glimpse of themselves nearly two decades from now—"retired" and attending a "real" opera.

Perhaps, by then, the wheelchair will be a permanent fixture, along with their white hair.

No matter.

In this world, which could tantalizingly be theirs…

…is freedom.

In the waning golden hour of their lives is such sweet and easy peace.

All too soon, the premonition fades into the present. Hannibal removes his sunglasses while Will returns his focus to the ascending chandelier.

And so it begins.

El Fantasma de la Ópera

Chapter End Notes

He absolutely cried.

Fragile Teacups

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the back of their palace office, perched on a shelf in the leftmost bookcase, rests a red rose beside a small picture frame. Beneath the glass is a monochrome photo of a bearded man in a tux. There are tears in his eyes, as he launches up from his wheelchair to give a standing ovation.

The following week, Will drops the final box with a resounding thud. From his place sitting at the kitchen counter, Hannibal sets down his discount teacup and eyes the rather crowded living room.

From a smaller box, Will slices through the strips of tape and rips away the plastic packaging. Then he unceremoniously upturns the cardboard box.

An assortment of thin, stainless steel tools clatter onto the table. Some have wire loops, round or triangular, while others taper out into a needlepoint. Another resembles a small palette knife.

Then Will turns his attention back to one of the boxes on the living room floor. Hannibal barely lifts his cup in time before Will slams down a hefty block of white clay.

Porcelain.

“Even if I *could* have found marble, all that chiseling would’ve driven me insane,” Will says while his back is turned. He occupies himself with breaking open the largest cardboard box.

And nestled deep within the layers of bubble wrap and blocks of styrofoam is…

A pottery wheel.

Hannibal smirks.

“—*No*,” Will snaps. He abruptly turns to point accusingly at Hannibal. “Stop.”

Hannibal sets down his tea and minutely widens his smile. “Stop what?”

“Don’t even *think* it.”

And there it is—that infuriatingly smug, cat-like grin. “Whatever are you on about?”

Will shakes his head with a sneer, but he can already hear that infernal song start up on their memory palace record player.

A certain *unchained* melody.

Will makes for the door.

“Wait—” Hannibal chuckles. But he quickly quells it upon seeing Will pause. The chair creaks as Hannibal rises to both feet and limps from around the table.

He looks over the equipment haphazardly strewn about. From the delicate, steady touch required for sculpting to the use of a pedal to power the wheel…

It was clever.

Thoughtful.

“There’s a shop about ten miles out,” Will mutters, his back still turned. “I fixed their boat motor. They’ll fire anything for free.”

Hannibal swallows at the tightness in his throat.

Such inconvenient compassion.

“Thank you,” he says. Seeing Will’s shoulders drop ever so slightly, Hannibal smiles. “If you wouldn’t mind, I could use your assistance moving all this to the study.”

“So you can hide how *bad* it is?”

The venom hangs in the air between them.

“I’d merely like some privacy.” Hannibal is careful to maintain a bit of levity in his voice. “For practice.”

Arms down at his sides, Will’s fingers fidget madly for several seconds. Finally, he dips his chin and says, “You stitched your own hand. That’s on *you*.”

After a pause, Hannibal nods once. “Did I also reset my elbow?”

“With help.”

“And my Achilles?”

Will holds his breath in his lungs. Then he stoops to pick up a heavy container of glaze. Before he disappears down the hallway, he pauses to adjust his grip and mutters:

“…at first.”

Will eventually shared that time with him.

But only in dreams.

As always, he made Hannibal work for it. And so, fly fishing rod in hand, Hannibal waded into the quiet of the stream.

Like riding a bike, the motions flowed naturally. He didn't know where Will went during the night, but if he could see Hannibal now, he'd undoubtedly be quite pleased.

With the utmost grace, the orange line curled and soared through the crisp morning air. A scarlet-feathered fly landed on the glistening surface. It was named, of course, and though fish were scarce in these crystalline waters, they were as good as caught once hooked.

…as if they needed more confirmation. Yet it never failed to make Hannibal smile, nonetheless.

The current whisked the fly downstream. Hannibal watched the line straighten in the sparkling ripples. Then he flicked the rod back and cast again.

Minutes passed.

Then hours.

Normally, he would find this unbearably monotonous. Yet all he needed to fuel his morale was pure, spiteful stubbornness.

Perhaps "obsession" was the better word.

It was only when he was on the brink of losing hope, the final REM stage nearing its end, that he got a bite.

Adrenaline alighted Hannibal's veins.

In the real world, his breath hitched. The slightest twitch passed through his body as he strained to steer the fleeing fish. From beside him, Will was deeply entrenched in REM sleep as well. Yet for some weeks now, a part of him was always in contact with Hannibal.

It was just the slightest touch, such as grazing Hannibal's shoulder with the back of his fingers or his knee brushing the side of Hannibal's leg, and from this he could subconsciously sense each time Hannibal was reminded.

…that Will cherished him back.

After a desperate battle against time, Hannibal grabbed the trout and hoisted the mighty steelhead from the water.

The light of the setting sun illuminated the dash of vibrant pink down its side. The writhing creature sagged in his grip and then melted to flesh and bone. With its life went the light.

The world dipped to black.

The remains whittled to dust. The ashes seeped through the gaps between his fingers and whisked away with the humid breeze.

It was the dead of night.

In the earliest hours of July 8th, Will—donned in a surgical mask and blood-spattered latex gloves—emerged from the back of Freddie's rental car. She had just finished cramming one of their suitcases into the front passenger seat. Matthew occupied the trunk, and cardboard boxes lined the floor of the car.

Will waved her over and had her stand vigil beside Hannibal's unconscious body, which was shirtless—aside from the stained bandages—and sprawled across the backseats amid bags of medical supplies. The fabric of his right pants leg had also been cut away.

In a continuous state of emotional shock, Freddie stood stock still beside the open car door. Present-day Hannibal looked with dim amusement at her distant, unblinking eyes.

Then a bloodcurdling scream and shattering glass sliced through the peaceful quiet.

Hannibal turned.

The windows of the main house were illuminated. Near the porch of the guest house and spotlighted by the car's headlights were the homeowner and Will.

Between them lay shards of glass in a pool of fizzing alcohol.

Champagne, Hannibal noted.

A red ribbon lay among the remains.

The older woman had fallen backwards, injuring her hip, and was struggling to scramble away.

Indifferent to the string of pleas and cries for help, Hannibal strolled over until he was standing beside Will, who had since discarded the mask and gloves. He studied Will's face.

There was an openness.

Still covered in drying blood, Will made to step forward, but the slightest movement caused her to scream with renewed vigor. Will flinched as if he'd touched fire.

In fact, there was pain in his eyes.

Monster, murderer, horror, disgust, revulsion—

Hannibal's brow twitched. He didn't understand why Will bothered with such drivel. Yet here he was, wholly empathizing. This time, however, his evolved self exuded no shame—only morose acceptance.

She was tantalizingly vulnerable, and yet his instinct was to help. In stark contrast to all their prey thus far, hers was a kind, gentle soul.

A wounded bird in the grass.

While being rescued, it can't understand that he meant no harm. The bird only sees a predator. Once nursed back to health, it will dart away in fear and never look back.

Will delighted in doing bad things to bad people.

He was also compelled to help those who were good and in need, if the devoted caretaking of his many strays were any indication.

True altruism.

Beautiful, in its own way.

But Will had always rejected any and all attempts to hail him as a hero. Gratitude and kindness were luxuries not to be afforded to those like him. The sheep thank their guardian sheepdog, who secretly desires to savage them yet refrains.

For much of his life, Will had strived to be one of them, despite the banality of it all or the betrayal to his nature. Now, he has relished in the majesty of his Becoming. There was no going back after tasting the forbidden fruit. He will never again be blind to that unspeakable beauty.

Nor will he ever be accepted by the sheep.

They feared him, avoided him.

And so, he steered them.

—and played God.

Yet the isolation hurts, as Hannibal was all too aware.

Will glanced at the car.

"Freddie."

"H-He's fine! I think," she blurted. "Still breathing."

Will stepped over the shattered remains of their wedding gift and crossed over to the car. Then he reached into his pocket. For a split second, Freddie's shallow, exploitative life flashed before her very eyes until she realized he was returning her phone.

"Take care of her," he murmured, tired. Then he seated himself behind the wheel.

Hannibal watched him speed into another sleepless night.

Finding a place, stabilizing Hannibal's vitals, displaying the murder tableau, cooking, cleaning, erasing their trail…

Then Will kept vigil.

Seated beside the bed, he feared, at any moment, that those breaths would stop.

But there was nothing he could do.

After labeling the new IV bag, Will paused while capping the pen. It was the morning of the tenth. The cap slipped from his uncoordinated fingers. He could hardly see it through his double vision as he crouched to pick it up. On the verge of passing out, he stared at Hannibal while holding the open pen.

Indeed, there was nothing more he could do.

Except……

The moment Will's head hit the motel room's pillow, after their little spat in the bathroom, he was out cold. No amount of shouting his name or shaking his shoulder would've awoken him, not that Hannibal tried.

Instead, he prepped a new IV line to spare Will's neglected body the discomfort. Will's breath hitched as the needle slipped beneath his skin.

Hannibal placed a kiss to Will's bandaged knuckles and murmured, "…merely returning the favor."

He only administered normal saline solution, yet Will slept for a full fourteen hours.

All the while, Hannibal—with semi-faded cat whiskers still staining his face, even after applying rubbing alcohol and several intense bouts of scrubbing—settled beside him.

Remaining conscious, this fallen angel watched over him as he slept.

As always, Will re-emerges in the morning.

First, he admires the newly constructed palace rooms and their novel architecture. Then he inevitably gets drawn into the familiarity of their past.

He peruses the vast corridors for some sort of sign or unexpected inspiration. But more often than he would ever admit, he indulges in reliving certain moments of intimate comfort.

He opens the door to one such memory now.

From seemingly ages ago, Hannibal had told him:

"Try again."

Will's knuckles were white as he gripped the railing. Sunlight reflected off the blinding fiberglass. Beyond the edge rushed the Atlantic, in their mad dash for freedom.

He shakily rose to his feet. Yet the moment he tried to push with his left foot, a searing jolt shot through the scar tissue like another bullet.

He quickly braced the railing with both hands and wrenched himself forward. But again, taking that step sent a vicious tremor down his useless leg.

His hands and knees hit the deck.

Will punched the ground with the side of his fist.

And he didn't dare look up.

Couldn't bear to.

Landfall was in three days.

Footsteps slowly approached. Will watched the shadow engulf him. Every muscle tensed at the sensation of Hannibal's eyes on him, scrutinizing and dissecting.

"Will."

"—why didn't you *leave*?" he hissed, seeing the erratic beam of white, the thundering blades, the winds whipping dust and debris into his face.

Will's throat had burned when he had screamed through the din and demanded Hannibal to run.

Cut loose the anchor.

Hannibal's shadow disappeared.

By instinct, Will glanced up.

Hannibal stopped some ten feet away. Palm up, he held out his hand.

Will's focus tracked up until, finally, their eyes met. In the open window to Hannibal's soul was not an ounce of frustration or disappointment.

Only pleading.

Stay with me.

Hannibal extended his hand a fraction more.

Will stared at those beckoning fingers, so close yet achingly out of reach. And without thinking, he stood.

He staggered forth, wobbling precariously, right arm outstretched—one step, then another. He released the railing.

Another.

His left leg was next. He didn't realize until he felt the fatigued muscles lock, yet he pushed through and forth into Hannibal's open arms.

Those hands that had carried him, mended him, and hurt him, now gripped like a vise on the back of Will's shirt. And Will clung to Hannibal—painfully so, down to the muscle beneath fabric and skin—and buried his face into Hannibal's shoulder.

Supported and relieved.

Complete.

Hannibal closed his eyes and leaned his head against Will's. "You should know by now that I *can't* leave without you…"

I promise.

…never again.

And so, while observing Hannibal partake in his daily warm-up—no boot and with a single crutch—Will finally realizes.

He hasn't fallen since.

"I should get you a cane."

Hannibal chuckles almost resentfully. "No, you should *not*."

"Why?" Will grins after taking a sip from his wine glass. "I'd assume your pompous *ass* would be into that."

Leaning against the tree, Hannibal retrieves his handmade porcelain plate from the picnic mat and skewers a tender piece of fish. It practically flakes off the translucent bones. "Recall our old colleagues."

Seated across from him, Will scoffs. But it *was* true. Frederick, Alana, and even Jack, after getting his own Achilles split in two, all sported that conceited accessory. Nevertheless, Will couldn't help but feel a sprig of disappointment. "I dunno…I can easily picture you swinging it around and posing like some sort of Victorian noble."

Hannibal swallows. "Technically, I'm a Count."

Will glares at his matching handmade plate, and Hannibal makes an amused huff.

They had appeared overnight without any word. Will had opened the cupboard that morning to find their plate shelf empty except for two.

He quickly opened the next one over and picked up the unfamiliar teacup.

"Are you familiar with—"

Will flinched and fumbled to catch the teacup. By some miracle, his finger hooked the handle, and he gripped the teacup close to his chest. Heart racing, he glared over his shoulder at Hannibal.

"…with bone china?" Hannibal asked.

Will cocked an eyebrow. "I assume it contains bone?"

"Bone ash. Fifty percent, to be exact." He crossed over and picked up the remaining one from the cupboard. "Doing so strengthens it significantly, allowing the structure to be thin, lightweight, and fairly translucent."

He held it to the ray of sunlight streaming in from the window, and Will was astonished to see the murky pink of his fingers through the glossy surface.

"Authentic bone china is also identified by the sound it produces when struck." He held out his teacup and minutely gestured Will to do the same.

When the edges connected, a pleasant chime echoed sweetly into silence.

Will smirked, and Hannibal mirrored the same upward curl of his lips.

"But would it survive a drop test?" Will asked.

Hannibal chuckled, lowering his arm. "Perhaps if I hadn't thinned the walls."

With a roll of his eyes, Will shook his head. "Well, maybe you should reconsider doing that. Wouldn't have to worry about time reversing if it can stay together in the first place."

He waited for a witty remark, but Hannibal merely stared at his empty teacup. Then he turned away to begin making breakfast.

Will watched him gather various cooking utensils and ingredients.

"So, what kind of bone?" he asked, eyes on Hannibal's hands.

"Cow is traditional," he answered. "But I used that as well."

Will nodded. Then he paused. "…in the *derogatory* sense?"

Hannibal was silent while he cracked an egg with only his right hand. As he poured the mixture into the sizzling pan, along with chopped onions, bell peppers, and bits of sausage that certainly didn't exist yesterday, he answered:

"Yes."

The gust flows in and rustles the verdant leaves. It also dries the sheen of sweat on both of their brows. Hannibal closes his eyes at the simple pleasure—yet another reward for at last

reaching the hilltop unassisted.

The first was a joyous, impassioned kiss.

But what did it prove? It'll be a while yet before Hannibal can even run or jump.

There's no time.

Will hears ticking.

This time, however, he sees a metronome. And in the once dreadful silence between each beat is music—a serenade for two.

As their lunch steadily disappears from their plates, they watch the shadows of clouds pass over the emerald fields.

Hannibal parts his mouth. "Shall we talk about teacups and time? And the rules of disorder?"

Will smirks. Then he reclines onto the picnic mat with a sigh. "Against all odds, it did gather itself back up again…"

Hannibal nods. "I wouldn't have attempted it so many times, had I truly believed it to be impossible."

"And maybe I wanted to be wrong," Will blurts without thinking. Yet as the words hang in the air, he feels no such regret. Still, he sighs and shamelessly changes the subject by saying, "You once told me that you had given a lot of thought to time, the passage of it, its ephemeral nature, and what that entails for us."

"Have you found yourself doing the same?"

"Yes," Will answers immediately, "especially as of late."

Eyes on the quiet landscape, Hannibal contemplates for a moment. "Do you perceive its passage to be fast or slow?"

Will scoffs. "Both…and neither." His lips perk as he reflects Hannibal's wry grin and says, "It's more along the lines of wiling it to pass, impatient to reach some *arbitrary* goal, only to find myself rushing to yet another one."

"Do you regret not savoring the journey?"

Will gnaws his lip. "In a way, yes." Then he holds his breath for a moment. "But just because I've skimmed the notes doesn't mean I didn't take them." He closes his eyes. "It's all there, constructed in painstaking detail."

Then he pauses.

"—*except* yesterday, *Hannibal,*" he snaps, the notion abruptly dawning on him. "I distinctly remember going to bed *late* last night and then waking up early *this* morning."

Hannibal hums as he sips from his teacup.

Brow furrowed, Will props himself on his elbow and glares at the sheepish cannibal. The impossibility of the bone china's timeline abruptly dawning on him, he places his hand on the side of his own neck. "Did you knock me out for an entire *day*?!"

Avoiding eye contact, Hannibal calmly swallows.

"Two days," he corrects before Will pounces him.

August draws to a swift, merciless close.

That evening, a private jet touches down in Havana.

And Will, upon waking up alone the following morning, finds a figurine of, not himself, but of the "goodest" boy.

Forgetting to breathe, Will picks it up. The porcelain was left unpainted and unglazed to preserve as much detail as possible. He gently runs his fingers across the exquisitely sculpted fur and delicate floppy ears.

Winston sits as he always would on the porch, with sad eyes and a tilted head, awaiting Will's return.

An apology.

The scent of a sizzling protein scramble in the air, Will rubs at his stinging eyes.

…and accepts.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Hannibal was really looking forward to recreating that "Ghost" scene with Will.

Maybe he'll get a chance with a theremin one day…

Last Supper

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional warnings:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One late September morning, Hannibal left his iPad on the bed. As Will stepped out of the bathroom, he noticed the screen light up.

On it was a notification.

Will glanced at it and then over his shoulder down the hallway. Judging by the sounds, Hannibal was fully preoccupied in the kitchen. So, he picked it up.

To his surprise, there was no passcode set. He was almost disappointed. Back in Baltimore, he could tell, by the fingerprints on Hannibal's original iPad, that the obsessed, lovesick cannibal's passcode had been 9-4-5-5.

W-I-L-L

The link opened TattleCrime.com. The article was posted one minute ago, though the creation date was three weeks ago.

Will scrolled past the giant headline and tasteless photoshop job of him and Hannibal in crosshairs. There were antlers tacked on to their heads.

Disgraced, former FBI Head of Behavioral Science Unit Jack Crawford gives bold ultimatum before flight.

Will played the unstable cellphone video.

"—while they've been enjoying their Cuban honeymoon, we've been amassing a large group. We're organized, vetted, and we know where they are."

The video shook erratically as she barreled through the crowd and raced to keep up with him.

"But how is this allowed? I mean, I know it's Hannibal we're talking—"

Jack abruptly stopped in his tracks, and Freddie essentially crashed into him.

"Even the Cuban government wants him gone. The whole country's been on edge for months. Enough is enough."

Freddie collected herself and huffed. *"And what makes you so sure it'll work this time?"*

"We're not stopping until they're brought back home." Then he added, almost imperceptibly, *"...for autopsy."*

Freddie was silent while she undoubtedly glared at him. In the background were shouts from approaching airport security guards. *"Any last words? They'll be watching."*

Jack dropped his luggage with a resounding thud. Then he turned and grabbed the small mic. Holding it up to his mouth, he stared—stoic yet eyes alight with bloodlust—into the lens and said:

"It's open season."

"Will—"

Will flinched and whipped around to see Hannibal peering into the bedroom. Of course he had heard everything, but his expression remained warm and completely unperturbed.

"If you would, I could use some assistance in the kitchen," he said, tying an apron around his waist.

Will lifted his brow. "Got something special in mind?"

Hannibal's smile widened as he tossed Will a spare apron. Will caught it and was half-surprised *not* to find "kiss the cook" printed across the middle.

"A ten course meal," Hannibal said.

Will watches an egg fly into the air. After reaching the peak of its arc, it plummets back down and lands squarely on the spatula's edge. The contents splash into the awaiting bowl.

Will nods in approval. Not a speck of shell made it in.

Hannibal sets down the glass bowl. "Would you like to try?" he asks, casting the empty eggshell into the trash.

Will scoffs. "Would *you* like an egg to the face?"

Hannibal chuckles. "Perhaps it helped that I used to juggle in my youth."

"Is there anything you didn't do?"

"Besides fly fishing?"

Will smirks.

An array of lavish ingredients line every bit of counter space. It was the Noah's Ark of food—a single pair of each item. The portions were small yet perfect for the two of them. As Will

had gathered each of Hannibal's requested ingredients, he realized that he had been purchasing these over a course of several weeks, per Hannibal's shopping list addendums.

Before they started, Hannibal inspected each item and its quantity.

"As much as I would have preferred to keep this a surprise," Hannibal began, "I believe it would be just as appealing to make this together."

Will lifted an eyebrow. "I assume I'll be doing more than slicing the *ginger*?"

Hannibal grinned as he handed Will a slip of paper. On it was their menu.

R.M.S. "Titanic"

April 14, 1912

The First Class Menu

Will's eyes widened at the extensive selection.

And the implication.

After a long moment, he set down the paper with a sigh and averted his attention to the recipe cards Hannibal was laying out on the kitchen table. He picked the simplest one from the hors d'oeuvres section.

Oysters à la Russe.

Hannibal took the card for Canapés à l'Amiral. He placed oil in a skillet and turned on the stove. Then he made swift work of mincing the shallot and garlic.

As delicious scents filled the air, they worked in silence. Then they plated each dish at the same time.

After cleaning and stowing away each used utensil, bowl, and pan in their limited space, Will moved to choose the next recipe. Yet his stomach growled when he passed by the appetizers.

Hannibal smirked. After wiping his hands, he leaned against the counter and picked up one of the oysters. He nodded to Will. "Go ahead."

Will scoffed. "How unconventional." But he picked up a shrimp canapé and relished in the exquisite taste. The toasted baguette crunched loudly with each chew.

Hannibal swallowed and discarded the empty shell. "As this will be our only meal for the day, I see no sense in waiting."

"Good." Will huffed as he picked up the remaining oyster. "Didn't feel like learning the names and order of all those utensils anyway."

“As such, the next soup, Consummé Olga, should be served immediately,” he said before biting into the shrimp canapé.

Will nodded as he chewed. “Can we skip the barley soup? That other one sounds way better.”

Hannibal smiled softly while he removed the empty plates. “Whatever you’d like.”

In the early afternoon, Will watches Hannibal determinedly chip away at a cube of perfectly transparent ice.

“I definitely chose right with the ceramics,” Will mutters, eyes closed and leaning his head on his hand, elbow on the table. He ditched his apron long ago. “Much quieter.”

Still in his apron, Hannibal smirks as he gathers the fine bits of ice and douses each serving with the sweet, alcoholic mixture. Then he garnishes the top with a twisted sliver of orange peel. “Stay with me, Will,” he says, placing the cocktail of shaved ice in front of him. “We’ve only just started the second half.”

Will opens his eyes and chuckles. Straightening himself in his chair, he takes a sip of the refreshing punch. “This a palate cleanser?”

“Indeed.” Hannibal pulls up his chair.

Will eyes the ice pick while he stirs the slush with his spoon. “I imagine intrusive thoughts come often for you. All these sharp objects next to unsuspecting cuts of meat…”

Hannibal chuckles. “Fortunately, I have excellent control over such urges.” He draws the frosted glass to his mouth and sips. “…for the most part.”

In his mind’s eye, he vividly—and viscerally—recalls slamming the ice pick into Sogliato’s temple. Mouth agape, Bedelia nearly dropped her punch romaine.

And standing in the doorway to this memory palace dining room is Will, who gawks and then cackles through his teeth at Hannibal’s, “Technically, *you* killed him.”

Back in their Cuban kitchen, Hannibal smirks.

Will drinks the last of his melted ice. Feeling a bit buzzed, he licks his lips as he sets down the emptied glass bowl. “You really were as fucked up as I was.”

Hannibal finishes his serving with a sigh. “As I mentioned before, I put great effort into rebuilding the lifestyle I once had…and found that I could no longer derive satisfaction from the activities I once enjoyed.”

“Even sex?” escapes Will’s mouth before he can stop it.

Hannibal blinks. Then, eyes downcast, he murmurs with the faintest upturn of his lips, “… even sex.”

Shameless, Will grins. “Jesus, I really *have* ruined you.”

Hannibal’s crooked smile widens. “Drawing, cooking, dancing, partaking in music, tending to artifacts, hosting lectures on Dante, serving guests, *killing*…” Eyes distant, his voice trails off. Then he dips his chin and gazes at his empty bowl. “I was curious…how you would have reacted, had you been there with me.”

Will’s smile disappears. “As you said, you wanted to show me.”

Solemn, Hannibal nods. “For the first time since Mischa, I wanted to ‘share’… My life, my truth, all that I cherished…” Silent anguish crosses his face. Then he parts his mouth. “I hoped… I hoped one day you would cherish them too.”

Forearm leaning on the counter, Will watches the steady drip from the chiseled block of ice. It collects in the platter below. He looks to Hannibal. “Didn’t I?”

Each and every time.

He always named the lure.

Always caught the fish.

Hannibal at last meets his gaze and smiles with a flash of teeth. Then he averts his eyes to the remaining few recipe cards. “Shall we?”

Will picks up the next one—the seventh course.

Roast Squab and Cress.

“I find it a bit hypocritical, don’t you?”

Hannibal glances up at Will as he finishes his last bit of chilled pâté, their ninth course. “Do you find the preparation of foie gras to be unethical?”

“Clearly you *don’t,*” Will mutters. “I haven’t forgotten how you once shoved a tube down my throat.”

And then stroked my face, goes unsaid, yet they both hear it.

Hannibal smirks for a millisecond. “And you?”

They’re seated across from each other, width-wise, at the mahogany dining table. It’s late in the afternoon, and the harsh sun is finally beginning to wane, cooling the humid air and softening the light.

Will picks up the cloth napkin from his lap and wipes his mouth. “Perhaps long ago, I would’ve said, ‘Yes.’” The corner of his mouth perks. “But I’ve since eaten a woman’s lungs that were cut from her while she was still breathing, a frightened man who I *beat* to a pulp with my bare hands, and a gorged, drowned ortolan without hiding my face from God…”

Will pinches his glass by the thin stem and swirls the remaining red wine. As he draws it to his mouth, he mutters, “At least *I* never claimed to employ an ethical butcher.”

Hannibal makes the faintest of smirks. “But I do believe in the concept of ‘free-range’ just as you prefer the taste of the ‘wild caught.’”

“Free-range rude…” Will murmurs on instinct. He licks his lips. “I suppose the hunt makes it all worth it. Worth*while*.”

“As you would be loath to shoot fish in a barrel,” Hannibal says, picking up his own half-empty wine glass, “I would prefer not to cage or farm my quarry.”

Will lifts his brow. “But you did with Gideon.”

Hannibal sips and subtly scrunches his face as if the wine had soured. “For obvious reasons, I wouldn’t do that again.”

Will chuckles. “Didn’t enjoy his company?”

Hannibal stares at the swirl of wood grain between them. He can hear the incessant tap of silverware on his dining room table. Each one was like an ice pick to his skull.

He sighs. “I was reminded of how tiresome I find most people, given enough time.”

“So it turns out you’re an *introvert* after all…” Will scoffs as he leans back into his chair. “Who would’ve thought?”

Hannibal grins. “How else could I tolerate being cooped up with you for days, if not months, on end?”

“Because you don’t,” Will answers for him. Sighing through his nose, he smiles. “You *delight*.”

The tenth and final course is the sweets.

Hannibal correctly predicted that they would only have the stomach for one more dish that evening, and of the selection, Peaches in Chartreuse Jelly were the most alluring.

With the gelatin already set in the fridge, Hannibal slipped off the skin from the boiled clingstone peach and removed the center. Then he prepared the boiling syrup and submerged the two halves.

Of course, what he could never fully predict was Will. And while Hannibal cooked away and minded his own business, Will was seated beside the kitchen counter and watched him intently. His searing gaze on Hannibal’s back, he at last gives voice to that which had been plaguing him since that morning.

“What do you *really* think is going to happen tonight?”

The softly bubbling syrup is almost deafening in the silence.

“A crossroad,” Hannibal finally answers, still facing the stove.

Glancing away, Will nods. “A fork in the road. …Or maybe ‘river’ is more accurate. Which way will it take us?”

“I would think the destination, whether a lake or the sea—”

“Or a concrete dam?”

“It matters not, so long as we arrive together.”

The corner of Will’s mouth perks. Elbows on the faux marble counter, he interlocks his fingers and rests his chin on the side of his hands. When at last the sprig of sentimentality fades to an ignorable level, he says:

“From the very beginning, I’ve likened our time to a stay of execution. Seems you have as well.”

Hannibal turns off the stove. He removes the pot from the burner and empties the contents into a bowl on ice. His back still turned to Will, he asks, “Have you not enjoyed this occasion?”

“Our final night?”

“—in Cuba.”

Will lifts his brow. “That’s awfully optimistic of you, *doctor*.” Shifting in his chair, he huffs. “But I suppose that’s to be expected of someone who regularly breaks teacups, in hopes that time will reverse.”

Hannibal briefly glances over his shoulder. Will catches a glimpse of deepening wrinkles near his smiling eyes. “Curiously, I’ve been feeling less inclined to continue that experiment.”

Now that you’ve created your own?

Yes.

Will smirks.

As the peach halves cool in syrup, Hannibal rinses the steaming pot. Will gets up with a sigh and fetches a small cutting board. Standing to the left of Hannibal, he begins to slice.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Will says, in between popping a small sliver into his mouth, “this has all been very sweet, but it’s hard to shake this sense of impending doom breathing down our necks.”

Hannibal’s eye twitches imperceptibly.

Almost.

Will eats another slice and makes it perceptible.

Hannibal sighs as he rinses the soap from the pot and fetches the nearby dishcloth. "Compared to how you fared last time, this is a substantial improvement."

Will scoffs. "Yeah, I'd say *not* throwing expensive watches into lakes in a fit of madness is a good sign."

With a faint smile, Hannibal stows away the cleaned pot and makes for the fridge. From the top rack, he pulls out a tray of chartreuse gelatin. "Yet has surviving before not made the cliff's edge more tolerable?" he asks, beginning to break up the left third.

"When, against all odds, the worst somehow *didn't* come to pass?" Will murmurs. Eyes distant, his cutting slows to a stop. The perfectly divided slices rest fanned out on the cutting board.

Yet the knife remains in his grasp.

"I once wondered what I would've chosen," Will says under his breath.

Hannibal pauses for only a second. "When you were incarcerated?"

Will nods. "My last meal…before the chair." His eyes flick to his dim reflection in the blade. "When I first realized what you had been feeding me, I was appalled. Hardly ate for days."

As Hannibal cuts intricate shapes from the gelatin, Will sees him slice Cassie Boyle's pink lungs, sauté them, and serve them to him with scrambled eggs and a smile.

Problem free.

"And then you visited me, again and again, and I…"

I don't want you to be here.

"I didn't understand…*why* I understood…"

I want you to believe in the best of me.

Just as I believe in the best of you.

"You were *supposed* to *gloat,*" Will snaps, lowering his voice to a harsh whisper, "not…not *lie* to get me acquitted or shoot a judge to delay the trial." He slowly crosses the kitchen. "Or call me your *friend*."

He stops behind Hannibal, who sets down his knife just as Will places his own blade to Hannibal's throat. Breaths shallow, Hannibal somewhat lifts his chin. The blunt edge leans into his windpipe, yet he could feel the faint sting of the point just barely grazing his skin.

“I wouldn’t have let you die,” Hannibal breathes through his teeth.

“But you did,” Will snakes his left arm around Hannibal’s stomach, fingers finding the scarred exit wound through the fabric of his apron and shirt. Will turns his head and leans his left ear on the back of Hannibal’s shoulder, “in some other world.”

A shudder passing through him, Hannibal closes his eyes. “What did you request?”

“I wouldn’t have gotten it.”

“Anything that can happen, happens…”

Will smirks. “I would have asked for your cooking, of course.” Then he closes his eyes as well and listens to the quickening thump of Hannibal’s heart. “Guess.”

He feels the bob of Hannibal’s Adam’s apple against the blade.

In the darkness, a metal table fades into view.

Between them, unbreakable glass.

His unruly hair overgrown and in complete disarray, Will lifted his plastic spoon and sank it into the rich mixture.

“*Sanguinnacio dolce.*”

Eyes glistening, Hannibal watched him swallow.

Then he abruptly placed his right hand on the glass so that Will could see.

Made with…

Beneath Hannibal’s sleeve, down the underside of his wrist, was a fresh row of stitches.

Through his haunting, defeated eyes only, Will smiled.

The pain too exquisite—far worse than setting flame to his skin—Hannibal backs out of that forbidden room. Collapsing to the floor, he squeezes his eyes shut and covers his ears.

After several excruciating minutes, the door opens. He feels Will’s warmth as he sits beside him, shoulder to shoulder.

“You also poisoned it.”

Slowly lowering his hands, Hannibal only nods.

With a shake of his head, Will sighs. “I would have preferred that.”

“You…” Voice ragged, Hannibal swallows. “You find capital punishment undignified.”

Will smirks fleetingly. “Getting zapped like some fly is not very……*intimate*.”

Standing in the kitchen, Hannibal places his left hand over Will's and interlocks their fingers. The edges of their rings catch for a split second. He cups Will's face with his right hand, running his thumb along the scar, and cranes his neck to kiss the side of Will's mouth. He brushes up against that familiar scratch of stubble and curls his right fingers tighter in those unruly locks.

Will's breath hitches at the firm tug to his scalp.

"I don't care if they take it," escapes his mouth as his knife clatters onto the counter. "Your paintings, the red fly, Winston…" Will moves his right hand up until it rests over the freshest scar below Hannibal's ribs. His heart is racing. "I can't stand to watch them *burn*."

Nuzzling the side of Will's head, Hannibal nods. "Then let them have it."

...and live on.

Tears in his eyes, Will chuckles. "With luck, they'll become cursed."

Reflecting his wistful whimsy, Hannibal twists around to at last kiss Will squarely on the mouth. "Restless…and malicious eternal," he exhales between breaks for air.

Will's crooked smile widens. "Life after death."

At 6 o'clock, they finished their dessert.

In the empty kitchen, the counters were wiped clean and each item was returned to its place. Not a single crumb remained of their marathon feast.

Staring into the steamed bathroom mirror after his shower, Will buttoned up his white dress shirt. He rolled up his sleeves to just below his elbows. Already dressed in black jeans, he seated himself at the foot of the bed and tightened the laces on his brown hiking boots.

Hannibal chose equally familiar clothing. Opting for a bit of practicality over style, he wore a gray long-sleeved shirt with his slacks. This time, he put on black outdoor shoes.

As Hannibal makes his way to the bedroom, Will scrutinizes each and every movement. To the untrained eye, Hannibal hides it well. Yet Will caught that subtle imbalance in the cadence of his strides. The roll of his right ankle locks at a shallower degree.

Without a word, Will turns off the lights and collapses onto the bed next to Hannibal.

Eyes closed, they lie on their backs, not touching yet able to sense the other's warmth.

It takes Hannibal all of one minute before he rolls to face Will. With a sigh, Will turns toward him and takes Hannibal's right hand. Their fingers intertwine as he draws it up to his mouth and presses his lips to the raised scar between the tendons.

In the darkness, Will hears water.

It churns and gurgles as it floods in. Salt is in the air, and with it comes a merciless chill.

This old dream—ice collapsing, a towering wave, rising water—has returned to haunt him, and Will dimly wonders if this had been clairvoyance all along.

Relentless, the Atlantic slowly rises up. The axis is tilting.

All too soon, that frigid water trickles onto the bed and scalds his skin.

Will opens his eyes.

11:40 PM.

There's a dim light in the darkness. A notification has appeared on Hannibal's iPad.

Motion detected at the base of the hill.

Hannibal smiles softly at Will, who has pushed himself upright and rubs at his weary face.

"Once more unto the breach?" Hannibal asks knowingly.

Arms resting on his knees, Will stares into the darkness for a moment. Then he nods.

Once more…

Will gets out of bed and fixes a wayward tuft of his hair.

They reconvene at the balcony. The fresh air between them buzzes alight with anticipation.

Dread.

Car doors slam shut in the distance.

Yet eyes fully adjusted to the dead of night, Will looks to his husband.

"If our lives were to end right this moment…"

His dearly beloved turned to face the tranquil ocean and placed a contemplative hand to his chin. The umbrella rattled softly in the cool breeze of the setting sun.

"…would you regret it?"

"Hannibal," Will says, cordially extending his hand. On his face is a soft grin.

At peace.

Excited.

Alive.

"It's been a privilege dining with you tonight."

Chapter End Notes

Time to jump ship.

The Hunt

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional warnings:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Go.”

The door bursts open in a shower of splinters. Jack braces, but in the ensuing seconds is silence.

No wire triggered.

No explosion.

Incredulous, he slowly takes a deep breath to quell his racing heart.

Following their history of “scorched earth” tactics—first the RV, then their camping supplies, and finally the stolen yacht that was found sinking and spewing smoke a mile off shore—Jack was sure that Will would have used Matthew’s incendiary device for this final safe-house.

Shotgun in hand, he steps out of his car and pulls down the military-grade night-vision goggles over his eyes. With four tubular lenses each, he and his accomplices appear almost alien in the moonless night.

Leaving behind a team to guard the vehicles, Jack gestures for the engines to be shut off. As planned, the keys are randomly distributed across separate groups. While the hunters set off into the forest, he and several others raise their weapons and race inside the house.

Jack leads the charge.

The most deluded part of him hopes that they really *have* caught them off guard. After all, Freddie’s stolen rental car is still parked in the driveway.

They file into the vacant living room. On a side table, beside a luxuriously cushioned leather chair, rests a book. As he passes by, Jack catches a glimpse of “Edgar Allen Poe” on the cover.

He snorts and then tightens his grip on his shotgun as they cross down the hallway. With one swift kick, the bedroom door flies open.

The king-size bed is empty, of course, and, to his frustration, was perfectly made. As several check the closet and bathroom, Jack trains his shotgun on the billowing curtains.

Step by step, he creeps forward with his finger heavy on the trigger. One of the bounty hunters grasps the edge of the right-side curtain. On the cue of a nod, the drape flies open.

Jack stares at the empty balcony.

Behind him, he hears the others give the all-clear. But he already knew upon spotting a piece of paper wedged in a gap in the wooden railing.

He grabs the fluttering scrap.

Did you see? is scrawled mockingly across the center.

…in Will's handwriting.

Jack crushes it in his fist.

"The bed's still warm."

He turns to see her seated on the edge of the mattress. In knee-high boots, khaki pants, and a dull green top, she appears as if dressed for a safari. The covers are flipped back on the right side, and her fingers pass over the area near the pillow.

Jack flips up his night-vision goggles. "You'd think that'd be a concern."

"They're not at the house," Alana says, picking up the figurine of Winston from the nightstand, "and they're not coming back." Her thumb brushes over the lovingly crafted sculpt. "Even for me."

Jack opens his mouth to respond when his walkie-talkie buzzes to life.

"—all set," is Miriam's whispered voice. "They're still here."

Alana observes the hit of adrenaline that floods Jack's veins. He grabs the device from his belt and raises it to his mouth. "Copy."

Alana watches him reposition his night-vision goggles.

"Watch your step," she murmurs.

Jack stops in the doorframe. Standing with his back to her, he lingers for all of two seconds before leading the charge into the night.

Crouched just beyond the beaten path, Will takes a deep, grounding breath.

He closes his eyes.

A gentle breeze brings reprieve from the humid air. The sound like shallow waves tumbling across a rocky shoreline, it rustles the dense tangles of foliage. The edges of large leaves gently tickle the exposed skin of his forearms.

In total darkness, he listens to the chirps of crickets calling for love.

And for a heartbeat, it was the 80's.

He shakes his head at that scrawny, curly-haired boy—wide-eyed and endlessly, morbidly curious.

Aimlessly kicking rocks on his way back from school, he caught sight of a mound of tawny fur on the asphalt.

Only a child.

He immediately picked up a stick and scurried over.

Didn't know anything.

Squatting in the empty road, he prodded at the intriguingly flattened squirrel. Several flies scattered. It didn't seem a day old. In fact he was certain it wasn't there yesterday. Yet from the exposed pink flesh, tiny pale flecks squirmed as they reacted to the disturbance.

Couldn't.

How fascinating.

Time of Death by Insect Activity

—he typed nearly two decades later.

Somber, Will glances down the road.

Zero clue what life had in store for you.

Night has fallen, and from around the blind corner passed by the dim yellow of his father's flashlight.

"Winsto-o-on!"

"Always the new boy at school, always the stranger."

"Always."

It didn't matter, because he hadn't been alone.

Then one summer night…

Will watches the ringed light freeze on a large mound of tawny fur.

While he sat for hours beside the road, silent except for the sound of lonely crickets and his own shattered heart, he naively swore to never have a dog again.

To never love again.

With a sigh, Will crouches beside this remnant of himself.

What he would have given, in that very moment, for someone to have been there…

“I won’t tell you it’ll be ok,” he says, as that lonely, perpetually misunderstood boy slowly turned to look at him. He answers those teary eyes with a faint, yet wholly empathetic smile. “But it’ll be worth it.”

I promise.

He stands and ruffles his kid self’s hair as he departs. The crunch of gritty dirt gradually melds into the sharp clicks of his shoes on hardwood.

He removes his hands from his pockets. Clutched snugly in his palm is the perfect sculpt of Winston II, which he repeatedly runs his thumb over. He stops beside Hannibal’s desk and places it beside the red fly on the book of gouache paintings. Two teacups—with reinforced walls—sit steaming and half-full near the center.

Then he turns and seats himself at the desk’s edge.

At long last, the floors are polished, buffed from most of the scratches, and the window pane has been replaced, though its hue is a touch bluer. Despite the imperfections, his eyes proudly scan the new additions to their decor.

It’s home.

Even when they’ve gone from this life.

With a content sigh, Will pushes himself off the desk. He crosses through the waiting room and enters the vast main corridor of their memory palace.

The white marble floor stretches forward and backward in time until it vanishes into the foggy horizon. The gilded, arched ceiling looms over ten stories above. Like a cathedral, the walls are adorned with glorious Renaissance-era paintings.

Will lifts his eyebrows at the sight.

Hannibal has certainly been busy.

Yet there’s just one thing missing.

Speaking of which, his husband has so far been making himself scarce. And in times like these, it usually means that Hannibal is occupying the far end of their palace.

With a smirk, Will takes a deep breath and faces down the corridor. He cups both hands to the sides of his mouth.

*"*If you think you can avoid this opener, *think again!"*

And as his derisive voice bounces off the ornate walls—while a twig snaps some twenty feet away—Will makes his choice.

Like an approaching tidal wave, those iconic guitar riffs build, swell, and crest in a way that ignites his soul. His heartbeat never crossing 85, Will tightens his grip on the Buck 120 knife. Its vicious, curved edge glints in starlight.

Hungering to bite.

Standing light-years away at the farthest end of their palace corridor, a certain cannibal's upper lip twitches as he readies a dagger. Crouched in the lush greenery, Hannibal knows *exactly* why he's thinking of grating guitar music at a time like this.

The things I do for you…

Only me.

Welcome to the jungle.

Perfectly on cue with the "jump" part, Will and Hannibal leap from the undergrowth.

—on opposite sides of the forest.

The posse erupts in a flurry of shouts. Guns and rifles raised, they wildly scan their surroundings through the hazy green of their night-vision goggles. But there's no sign of their target.

Or their seventh comrade.

Then the bushes thrash from off to the right. Four cautiously advance with their weapons trained while the remaining two keep a lookout.

Something dark is visible through the gaps in the leaves.

I got so close to him.

When their demands go unanswered, the first hooks the muzzle of his rifle in the tangled vines and pushes it aside.

Sometimes, I felt like we were doing the same things…

And there lies the seventh man.

On *both* sides of the forest.

They hadn't planned this. And yet, so it was—two scenarios happening simultaneously.

No words are exchanged from this distance.

Nor conscious thought.

As Will silently draws a throwing knife, just as Hannibal does from his own vantage point in the tree, they move as one.

Mirror images.

They aim for the middle.

Steels sinks deep into flesh as the second bounty hunter crumples to a heap. In a panic, the remaining five unleash a hail of bullets into the canopy. All the while, Will slips down from behind the cover of the trunk and makes for the river.

They cease fire in time to hear footsteps fleeing through the leaf litter. Like a pack of wolves, they give chase.

Sensing them close in, Will maneuvers around a slight dip in the ground and skids to a halt at the edge of a gulch. Beyond the drop-off races the river, its water black in the starlight.

Here is where their paths diverge.

Whereas Hannibal couldn't afford such a luxury, Will slowly raises both hands by his head. Red laser sights swarm erratically in the space between his shoulder blades.

They warily close in. But from this angle, they can't see that Will's eyes are closed.

He's listening.

The link with Hannibal broken, he devotes his full concentration to the approaching footfalls of his hunters. The moment their steps morph from soft thuds in the detritus to the brittle crunch of dried grass, Will abruptly kicks off the ledge and dives into the rushing water.

The bounty hunters sprint forth and then holler as the ground caves beneath them. Three plummet into the pitfall trap. The remaining two skirt around the edge. A hail of bullets burst across the river's surface.

Holding his breath, Will is careful to stay at least one body-length below the surface. As the current whisks him away, streams of shimmering bubbles languidly drift by. He even feels a few bullets gently bounce off his neck and face.

The barrage abruptly stops when they inevitably run out of ammo.

—or so Will hopes as he braves venturing up to take a desperate breath.

Gasping at the surface, he sees them gawk from the top of the gulch. One dashes for the bridge further upstream while the other casts aside his depleted rifle and yanks off his night-vision goggles. Water splashes loudly as he jumps in.

Will swims for the opposite bank and scrambles up the mud. Water spills off of his clothes in solid lines. His pursuer emerges from the river some ten yards back.

Hindered by his drenched hiking boots, Will hears the distance rapidly close between them. Running out of options, Will abruptly stops in his tracks and turns.

Eyes wild through dripping hair, the Rambo-esque bounty hunter charges in, both hands gripping a serrated Bowie knife which is poised like a spear.

Yet Will simply waits.

And calls upon that *well*-practiced muscle memory.

It took weeks for him to relent.

Will could have hid behind the excuse of waiting for time to heal Hannibal's crippling wounds. But by the first week of September, Hannibal had reintroduced pull-ups to his workout routine. And still, Will refused to ask.

So, under the guise of spotting him, Will watched the leaves rattle as Hannibal used a branch as his bar. His eyes inevitably tracked to the flex of muscle beneath the sweat-slick skin of Hannibal's arms and back, and the intriguing manner in which the ruddy, raised Verger brand stretched and compressed with each rep…

As always, he exercised shirtless.

Hannibal could only make it to five at a time. Then his arms would start to quake, yet he stubbornly persevered until, with a guttural huff, his chin leveled with the branch. Set completed, he dropped down to the grass and leaned against the trunk to catch his breath.

When he thought Will wasn't looking, he would quickly massage the deep scar below his heart.

That persistent ache.

Inevitably, it was the second week of September.

After coating his body in a layer of sunscreen, Will grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge, slipped into his athletic shoes, and met Hannibal at the base of the hill.

On his way back to the house, Hannibal was in the middle of toweling the sweat from his face. But he paused on seeing Will approach. Will tossed him a water bottle, which Hannibal

caught and nodded in thanks. He took several large gulps while Will cast aside his own bottle.

Hannibal eyed the discarded bottle as he replaced the cap on his own. Then he looked at Will and his toned shirtless form.

Baring all of his scars.

Will closed his eyes for a second and took a breath. "…How did you do that?"

Hannibal microscopically tilted his head. For all their shared musings and palace rooms, communicating wasn't *always* an exact science, especially once Will discovered how to cordon himself off from Hannibal's snooping, as he was doing now.

So, after a few blinks, Hannibal caved and asked, "Do—?"

"What was that, martial arts?" Will cut in, brow furrowed and avoiding eye contact. "How were you just…able to *throw* him like that?"

Hannibal grinned. He neatly set aside his water and folded towel. "Simply a modified version of judo." Then his eyes scanned the surrounding grassy area before his focus returned to Will. "Shall I demonstrate?"

Will lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "You sure?"

Still with a confident smile on his face, Hannibal backed up several paces and waited with his arms down at his sides.

Will stared. "What do you want me to do?"

"Attack."

Will's eyes flicked to and fro as he hesitated. "…*how*?"

Hannibal feigned disappointment. "Do you no longer wish to give me a Reckoning?"

The corner of Will's mouth twitched. "Well, you haven't been *severely* betraying my trust as of late…"

"Good," Hannibal said curtly. "But now's not the time for marital bliss. Recall the times I did you wrong and *attack*."

Abigail, Molly, and Beverly immediately sprang to mind. But Will refrained from delving *too* deep into those old wounds. The last thing they needed was for Hannibal to become bedridden again.

Yet the final straw was for the fucker to lift his chin and stare down at Will with a wide, smug-ass grin.

Feeling that scorching sprig of zest, Will curled his fingers into a fist and lunged forth. In scarcely a second, he crossed the distance and hurled his knuckles toward the unscarred cheekbone.

Right before impact, he somewhat decelerated his swing. But he felt his fist whip through thin air. Then a hand abruptly clamped down on his wrist, followed by a firm pressure to his shoulder.

Time slowed to a crawl as his feet left the ground and the world upended. Searing blue sky filled his vision. Then the ground's impact sent a shockwave through his ribs and punched the air clean from his lungs.

Gasping, Will lay sprawled on his back in a daze. Through the buzzing static, he could barely make out the steady crunch of grass. Then Hannibal's head blocked out the sun.

"The literal translation of judo is 'gentle way,'" he explained with not even a hint of exertion in his breaths.

Will squinted at that self-satisfied smile, still tantalizingly untouched. Rolling to his hands and knees, he scoffed between wheezes. "*Gentle*?"

Hannibal nodded. "More emphasis on technique than brute strength." He bent down and held out his hand. "Though strength certainly helps."

With a sigh, Will took it.

"I would prefer to walk you through each of the fundamentals," Hannibal began as Will brushed off the flecks of grass. "But I imagine you'd prefer a more…*expedited* approach."

Will pushed back the ruffled bangs from his eyes. "Just teach me the throw."

Finally, the playful levity vanished from Hannibal's eyes, and he nodded once. "We'll start with a proper *ippon seoi nage,* a one-arm shoulder throw." Then he paused. "Normally, we'd want more clothing on for the sake of better purchase. But I suppose we can make do."

"Well," Will quipped, "best be prepared for *any* situation…"

Yet Hannibal merely stared back from the shadows of his deep-set eyes. "Come closer."

After a moment's hesitation, Will stepped forward. Hannibal outstretched his right arm and placed his hand on Will's left shoulder. Just above where Jack had shot him, Will could feel the slight ridge in the center of Hannibal's palm.

"With your left hand, grab my right tricep," he said, "just above my elbow."

Will reached up and did so.

"Keep your knees slightly bent. With your right foot, step toward my right foot yet stay within my stance."

After Will stepped across, Hannibal nodded.

“Good, now with your right arm, reach under and around the back of my right shoulder.”

Sucking in a breath, Will leaned in. The skin of his shoulder pressed into Hannibal’s side as he hooked his hand on Hannibal’s bicep. But he felt Hannibal shake his head.

“No, deeper. Reach for the top of my trapezius.”

Exhaling through his nose, Will shifted closer until his right fingers were grazing the top of Hannibal’s right shoulder.

“Good. Bend your legs more. Step back toward me with your left foot. Stay within my stance yet keep your feet parallel to each other and mine.”

As Will did so, he blinked several times when suddenly his entire back was flush against the front of Hannibal’s body.

And his coarse chest—

“Bend your knees, *Will*,” Hannibal wheezed out, now that his torso was being stretched across the top of Will’s back. “Your hips need to be below mine.”

“Like *this*?!”

“*Yes*, now turn left and don’t let go.”

Although the chill of doubt—and self-consciousness—had begun to creep in, Will grit his teeth and blindly persisted.

“More,” Hannibal encouraged while raising his voice. “*Keep going.*”

Eyes squeezed shut, Will strained to twist down and left. Just when it seemed like the weight was too much, he suddenly felt the equilibrium shift. Momentum and gravity took control as he felt Hannibal slip past him.

With a resounding thud, Hannibal’s back struck the ground and his legs followed suit. Will stared in shock as he momentarily lost balance and stumbled forth, still clinging to Hannibal’s arm.

Breaths ragged and a sheen of sweat on their brows, they held eye contact for several long seconds.

Then a wicked smile—along with a flash of jagged teeth—crossed Hannibal’s proud, yet reverent face.

Beautiful.

Without a word, Will abruptly released Hannibal’s arm. But his husband wasted no time heaving himself back onto his feet and brushing the bits of grass off his skin. Once upright,

he reached out and placed his right palm on Will's left shoulder.

Their glistening skin burned alight under the blazing sun.

And his touch.

Dark eyes boring directly into Will's, Hannibal swallowed between breaths and asked, rather rhetorically:

"Again?"

The bounty hunter goes flying.

Sha-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-knees! Knees!

He lands on his back several yards away, which grants Will ample time to draw his Buck knife. A smirk briefly crossing his face, he can't help but feel giddy at how that actually worked.

Next, he recalls his wedding night.

The second one, technically.

Will flips the knife in his hand as the hunter scrambles to his feet. Steel meets steel with the ferocity of Matthew Brown. The impact sends a sting down Will's arm, but he doesn't skip a beat between slashes.

Right, left, up—

The series of clashes is interrupted by the sound of a dull strike. With a yell, the hunter reels from the deep slice across his chin and lower lip. But he abruptly doubles back and whips the blade forward. Flecks of hunter's rapidly flowing blood splash across Will's face.

Barely throwing himself out of reach, Will falls to his back and rolls away from the stabbing blade. He sweeps his foot across the ground, sending a spray of dirt into the hunter's face. It buys him the two seconds needed to lurch back to his feet.

Eyes stinging, the hunter lunges at Will's neck. Faster than what should've been possible, Will ducks right. Time slows as the serrated edge soars toward and past him. Will grabs the hunter's extended wrist and sends his knee up and through the back of the elbow.

The Bowie knife falls away at the snap of bone. Shrieking, the hunter writhes in Will's grasp. All the while, Will looks on with cold detachment. Empathizing fully with the grotesque truth of this pig's soul, he switches his grip on the Buck knife and aims for the throat.

Suddenly, the ground erupts in a series of bursts. Will drops behind his victim amid the shower of dirt and then dives for the trees.

Seated against the base of a trunk, he sheaths his knife and reaches for Matthew's pistol in the back of his waistband.

Seems the last bounty hunter has finally caught up.

Eyes closed, he forces his ragged breaths to soften.

And once again, he listens.

The wind has ceased along with the crickets, the commotion having silenced the wildlife.

In the darkness, he searches for the steady rhythm of his predator's footsteps.

Instead, he picks up on the low roar of cascading water.

Ice crumbles from a towering cliff and explodes upon the ocean's surface.

From the impact, a tidal wave approaches.

Will shudders from the chill of his drenched clothes.

Sand and salt.

A footstep stops just beyond the tree.

Will snaps open his eyes and dashes for the waterfall.

Through the frantic sprint through the forest, he hears the pop of gunshots and zip of bullets.

By some miracle, he doesn't feel the rip of flesh.

Will stumbles into the clearing. Freed from the obscuring canopy, the night sky and all its stars open up ahead of him. Water roars as it tumbles over the weathered edge.

Will scans the area but doesn't see him.

Hannibal?

Then a loud crash in the brush causes Will to whip around. Gun in hand, he catches a flash of gold.

The barrel stops between her eyes.

Miriam.

Will flinches and steps back. There's a split second where his brain registers the ground shift beneath his foot.

Then a deafening snap.

He jumps at the sound.

It's only when he feels the chain pull taut that his nerves catch up and white-hot pain erupts from his left ankle. He falls to his back and doesn't recognize the agonized shout that rips from his own throat.

On instinct, his fingers reach for the source, yet his mind has already made the connection.

This is just confirmation.

He touches the bear trap biting his ankle.

Heavy steel jaws dig mercilessly into the fragile bone. He immediately curls forward to brace his hands on both spring levers. But they won't give from this shallow angle. Straining to twist his upper body above his hands only elicits another earsplitting cry. In desperation, he draws his knife and wedges the handle between the jaws.

"Stop."

He keeps trying.

"*Will.*"

He hears a shotgun rack through the sound of his own elevated breaths. Having only managed a millimeter of relief, Will pauses.

He closes his eyes.

In that fleeting moment of silence, he decides to go home.

Water rises.

In the seat whose molecules had heard all their conversations—petty irritations, deadly revelations, flat announcements of disaster, and their melodic orchestrations of carbon—Will takes his place across that echo of him.

"You and me," Hannibal had said, as their destinies swam in blood and emptiness.

Settling for dinner.

Will can't help but smirk as the churning water creeps up their calves.

—while his left foot is chained to the floor.

At least the winter chill numbs the pain.

"What do you hear?"

The ticking is deafening.

While the Atlantic pools in his lap, Will looks on at that distant figment of his insufferable husband, and he inevitably feels that sweet sting of sorrow in his eyes. At what point did hatred give way to sentimentality, he couldn't say.

But he no longer merely has empathy.

He sympathizes.

Pure and simple.

I forgive you, Hannibal.

……will you forgive me?

As the water reaches his chest, Will opens his eyes.

From his place shackled to the forest floor, he lifts his chin and faces his fate.

Donned in quad tube night-vision goggles, Jack stands with the barrel pointed at Will's chest. To his right, Miriam keeps her pistol at the ready while her eyes dart around for her former captor. She's called for backup. As of yet, no one has answered.

There's one more place at the table.

Forcing his hitched breaths to even, Will swallows and mutters, "Hello, Jack."

"When the fox hears the rabbit scream," Jack says, grim yet with an undeniable glint in his eyes, "he comes running."

"But not to help," Will remarks, running his fingers along the metal jaws and clamped material of his hiking boot. His pulse throbs under the immense pressure.

"*Oh*, he'll help." Eyes momentarily flicking to Will's wedding ring, Jack lowers the shotgun's aim until it's pointed directly at Will's left leg. "Because you're no rabbit."

Will removes his hand. Eyes squeezed shut, he turns away and braces.

And then…

"*Jack*."

From the opposite side of the clearing, leaves rustle.

Will hisses out a breath as his heartbeat abruptly spikes. Worse than lead ripping through his flesh, he turns to see his husband emerge from the forest.

“I’m here,” Hannibal says as he walks out alongside the cliff’s edge. Against a backdrop of constellations, it becomes clear that his face, arms, and gray shirt are doused in a showering of blood.

Jet black in the starlight.

Magnificent.

Will can’t help but smile. He knows not a single drop is Hannibal’s.

And so, most startling is the weapon in this professional killer’s hands—not a knife, but a stolen rifle aimed directly at Jack’s heart.

In the split second distraction, Will snatches his fallen gun and points it at Jack.

Jack trains his shotgun on Will’s chest. Miriam, of course, has her pistol aimed squarely between Hannibal’s eyes.

And there they stand, locked in this stalemate.

“Shoot him,” Jack orders. “*Miriam!*” he snaps when she hesitates.

“She has merely weighed the outcomes, along with the reasoning behind our choice of target,” Hannibal cuts in. Then he glances at her. “And correctly, might I add.”

She glares back, unafraid.

“I know…” escapes her mouth, barely audible.

Jack doesn’t even try to refute it.

Had their places been swapped, he would not have hesitated to shoot Hannibal and sacrifice Miriam in the process. Perhaps a small part of him would’ve banked on Will not having the stomach to pull the trigger.

But if Will were to witness Hannibal perish before his eyes…

It goes unsaid that Jack would risk—and *is* risking—her that unspeakable fate.

Yet there still exists genuine care and concern for the once promising star-student. Even if the man’s eyes are shrouded, Will can see in the subtleties of Jack’s posture that each of his losses—his failures—still haunt him. And having had no children of his own, he mistakenly poured a part of that sentiment into responsibility for his subordinates.

But only to a degree.

This has always been war in his eyes. Casualties are not only an inevitability but a necessity. He leads, not guides. Hones, not nurtures. Trains, not teaches.

However, despite once again partnering with his tortured trainee, he accompanied her to the front lines and proved, rather definitively, that he's neither mindless nor heartless.

…because he doesn't order her again.

"Han*cock* and *Cunning*ham, huh?" Jack says with a crooked smile.

Never wavering his aim, Hannibal subtly grins. "Are we no longer on a first name basis?"

"I suppose I'm more comfortable the less *personal* we are."

"And yet, this all seems *very* personal."

The sound of cascading water drowns out the silence. Will slowly places his left hand back over the knife's hilt.

"Did you…?" Miriam clears her throat and steadies her strangled voice. "You killed *all* of them?"

"Only seven," Hannibal answers immediately, his eyes never leaving Jack.

Unperturbed, Jack leans his finger heavily on the trigger. Then, voice low, he asks, "But not *her*, I take it?"

Hannibal parts his mouth to speak when suddenly the wind returns. Through the reek of drying blood is the faintest hint of their final guest.

"…but not as wonderful as the act itself."

The mirror-like blade flipped open.

Hannibal's eyes flick to Will's.

And Will immediately drops his arm and fires.

In the same second that Miriam's arm erupts in a burst of plastic, Will wrenches free from his left boot and makes a break for it.

Shrieking, Miriam reaches for what her brain is convinced must be exposed flesh and splintered bone—a phantom pain. She inadvertently stumbles in front of Alana, who holds fire. Jack rushes to lock his aim on Will's back. He pulls the trigger just as Hannibal shoots.

The bullet hits Jack squarely in the chest.

The buckshot whips past Will's body as he runs. In the nearby grass lies Matthew's gun. With each stride, sharp searing pain shoots up Will's left leg. His ankle nearly caves, yet he keeps his focus on Hannibal and sees him cast aside the rifle. With one final push, Will lunges forth and into Hannibal's open arms.

They embrace.

Time slows as their feet leave the ground. The equilibrium is lost, and the horizon flips during their departure from this world. Yet they see none of it.

Time and circumstance have returned them to this moment.

This coin toss.

The cast die.

Eyes closed, Hannibal wraps his arms around Will's back. His hands lock together in an unbreakable vise. The blistering gale whips past them in a roaring torrent. But it all dissipates to silence, except for the march of their thundering hearts—front-to-front, beating as one. And as the cascading droplets float suspended beside them, Hannibal tightens his grip and makes his vow.

This time, he won't let go.

As attested by their rings.

To hold and to have.

For as long as he shall live.

And Will smiles.

Reassured.

It's comforting.

Beautiful.

Achingly so, he can only imagine it.

Because this time…

This time……

Just before the concrete river rushes in to claim them, Will reaches up.

And tucks Hannibal's head beneath his chin.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t go chasing waterfalls…

Fall

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional warnings:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The collision sent a shockwave through his entire being. It wracked his bones and ripped through flesh. As he lay stunned and flayed in the aftermath of shock, mind buzzing into silence and stillness, he became aware of the cold—a coolness, all encompassing.

It should have been soothing, yet he seized and shuddered violently.

A torrent coursed through him, tugging at his clothes and the roots of his hair. A rush of bubbles, gurgling, choking, burning—

Pressure.

Darkness.

Water.

Hannibal was conscious after impacting the river.

With the next stuttering heartbeat, he at last becomes conscious of his actions.

His actions…

Will.

Hannibal tenses his arms. In a delayed second, his numb fingers finally obey and curl into cloth.

And beneath it, muscle—latissimus dorsi.

Air slips from between Hannibal's teeth.

I have you.

I have you…

Just as he promised.

But the relief soon fizzles out. With the sharpening of his awareness return his brilliant leaps in logic.

Cynically, he knows what has happened.

Foolishly, he denies that reality, if only for a few seconds more.

Carried from the falls, he feels them begin to rise. In the pitch blackness, Hannibal releases one more breath to confirm. The bubbles whisk backwards across his cheekbones, so he lifts his chin and kicks.

Lungs screaming within their constricting cage, Hannibal's head finally breaches the surface. In a spray of droplets, he gasps the midnight air. The first breath restores enough strength to force Will further above the waves.

Silent, Will's head rests on Hannibal's shoulder.

Quiet.

The current pulls them under. Paralyzed by pain—exquisite and unbearable—Hannibal is powerless to stop it. Muffled by the rapids, a single sob bubbles from his gnashed teeth.

By happenstance, they're tossed back through the surface. As Hannibal sputters and heaves, he sees the gray foam whisk around a barrier in their path.

At the last second, he twists around and accepts the brunt of the impact against the submerged rock. The back of his skull smacks against it. The impact sends sparks through his vision and threatens to seize his consciousness, yet Hannibal responds in kind by tightening his grip.

Enough to bruise, his only comfort is that Will feels none of it.

It's horrific.

Fear…

He knows he must be shedding tears.

Yet this far into their cherished journey, he understands.

Despite his wrath.

…that this is not a punishment.

All I need is a stream.

Hannibal again fights the downward pull of the current. After greedily taking in more lungfuls of air, he cradles Will's head to the hollow of his neck.

When you can't overcome your surroundings.

Hannibal can't stop the bitter smile that tugs at the corner of his lips.

Put my head back, close my eyes…

In darkness, the final door to that night unlocks.

Turquoise water rushing past his polished shoes, Hannibal stands on the outcrop at the gates to Will's palace. With his right arm beneath Will's knees and his left supporting Will's shoulders, he holds him as he once did—despite deep snow and the newly singed flesh on his back—during the long trek from Hell.

Step by step, he wades into the quiet of the stream.

Through the beckoning door.

Blinding light engulfs him. A roar of crashing water bellows in his ears and burrows straight through his skull. Within the inferno, the scar beneath his ribs is torn asunder, along with his Achilles and the loose joint of his elbow. Unable to bear the pain, his knees buckle and hit tile as a cry is punched from his lungs. Something digs relentlessly into the right side of his ribs.

Through the murkiness, he hears the abrupt ceasing of running water and that cherished, righteous fury.

"Shit!"

Will had raced into the motel bathroom. Grabbing Hannibal's bare shoulders, he rolled him until his back was reclined against the side of the tub, instead of his side being draped over the edge.

Blue eyes darting frantically, he inspected each of the stitches and breathed out a long sigh upon finding no fresh blood or new tears in the skin.

"The *fuck* were you *thinking*?!"

Yet unable to even lift his chin, Hannibal could only release a harsh exhale. Will sighed in turn and then stooped to hook Hannibal's right arm around the back of his neck.

"C'mon," Will murmured, snaking his left arm around the back of Hannibal's chest. With a strained huff, he supported Hannibal just enough to help him clear the edge of the tub. The waterproof bandage crinkled as Hannibal settled into the scalding water. Yet he was still cognizant enough to keep his right foot and right hand on the outside of the tub.

Once Will was sure that Hannibal wasn't going to slip beneath the water and drown, he abruptly dropped to the bathroom floor and simply sat with his face in his hands.

Completely silent.

Hannibal slowly tilted his head toward him. His right hand twitched as he struggled to reach out. Careful not to touch Will's bloodied knuckles or bruised skin, Hannibal only managed to graze Will's forearm with the tips of his fingers.

Yet it was enough.

Will lowered his hands and, eyes bloodshot, he quickly swallowed back the rising anguish. Then he leaned over the tub to fetch Hannibal's soap.

Just as it was on the longest night—the *first* night—Will cleans his monster. Despite the morphine rapidly wearing off, Hannibal masked the true extent of his agony.

He wanted to—*needed* to—savor these touches with a mind unclouded by drugs.

Even when Bedelia had mended him, following his near-Reckoning from Jack, he kept fully alert beneath a reposed facade. He knew, intimately, that her first instinct was to crush the vulnerable and save herself the trouble. Had she chosen to plunge the needle driver into his neck, he would have been ready.

With Will, the possibility remained, certainly.

Yet there was no fear.

Eyes closed, Hannibal indulged in the feeling of those hands raking through his hair and kneading his skin, perhaps by necessity in the process of removing the stubborn, coagulated blood. But he knew that Will, with his plethora of mirror neurons, was deriving just as much pleasure as he was giving. And Hannibal thought, through the haze of delicious bliss, that he would very much like to give his perpetually tense husband a massage one day.

"I remember…when you saved me…" Will admitted, barely audible, as he scrubbed. Wisps of maroon swirled in the once pristine bath water. "Cordell's scalpel in my face…when you struck him down…" The corner of Will's mouth twitched. "That look in your eyes. I'll never forget it."

Panic.

Echoing down their palace corridor, they both heard that elevated voice.

Hannibal's.

"What did he give you?"

As Will's blood oxygen level steadily ticked down, Hannibal's disheveled, bloodstained face disappeared from view.

*"*What *did you* give *him?"*

Will scoffed as he wiped the smeared blood from Hannibal's cheekbones. "And while you were upturning the place, searching for a bag valve mask, all my hypoxic brain could think was how you really *did* care."

"I should have known…" Hannibal whispered, eyes closed.

Will smirked. "That he used succinylcholine?"

"…that I can't live without you."

Will froze.

Hannibal winced, already regretting the ceasing of Will's touch. "I'm sorry—"

"*Stop.*"

Will abruptly pulled the plug. The ruddy water gurgled as it siphoned down the drain. Then he tugged on Hannibal's arm, urging him to bend forward. Gritting his teeth, Hannibal slowly leaned over until his chest was resting on his bent knees. Will unhooked the shower head and briskly rinsed the soap from his hair and back.

The damaged nerves of his scarred brand tingled and sparked sporadically under the passing stream of water.

Then Will grabbed a towel and roughly dried off Hannibal's upper body. After casting the towel aside, he stooped to reach beneath Hannibal's arms and link his hands over Hannibal's sternum. Together, they stood. Will had him lean on the wall while he quickly dried Hannibal's legs and helped him into a pair of boxers.

Then he acted as Hannibal's crutch as they limped over to the bed. With great effort, Hannibal collapsed onto the mattress and settled onto his back. For a moment, Will watched him lie rigidly, effectively paralyzed by pain. Then he departed the room.

Empty wrappers were still strewn across the floor, and surgical tools lay in a bloody pile on the nightstand. But to Hannibal's surprise, Will had already replaced the motel's bloodstained sheets with one of their own sets.

After a minute, Will returned with a chair and the IV supplies. Through half-lidded eyes, Hannibal watched his beloved perfectly complete each step.

After last setting the drip rate, Will glanced at him. "Good?"

"Good," Hannibal breathed, the faintest smile gracing his lips.

With a nod, Will gathered up all the empty wrappers and stamped them down into the overflowing wastebasket. Then he dragged his chair to the right side of the bed and prepped a syringe.

"What are the odds of you not waking up?" Will asked, meticulously flicking out the air bubbles.

"This is a sedative—" Hannibal winced against a sudden excruciating spike. He exhaled slowly. "I'll likely remain conscious but…out of it…for some time."

With Hannibal's right arm resting on his lap, Will said nothing as he disinfected the inside of Hannibal's elbow and slipped the needle into a vein.

Hannibal sighed. The relief was instantaneous, which caused a noticeable drop in Will's shoulders as well. Hannibal closed his eyes. After a long moment, he murmured, "It's not your fault if I don't wake up."

“I know.”

With barely a twitch of his head, Hannibal nodded. Dimly, he was aware that his arm was still draped across Will’s lap. At the firm pressure to his palm, Hannibal realized that Will had removed the waterproof covering and was wrapping his stitched hand with gauze.

Though the sedative profoundly blunted his senses, he tried to focus on that aching tenderness.

That gentle touch.

Yet the next sensation puzzled him.

Water?

Sure enough, several more drops struck the back of his arm. Hannibal opened his eyes in time to see Will hurriedly brush at his eyes. Face stoic, he didn’t cry. Yet the tears slipped down his face, regardless.

Transfixed, Hannibal stared.

Then, with a sharp inhale, Will confessed:

“I’m worried about you.”

Before Hannibal could formulate the right words, Will scoffed resentfully and vainly wiped at his face once more.

“So I want to make this *very* clear,” he began. “You *can’t* blame me for trying.”

A prisoner of his own sluggish mind, Hannibal furrowed his brow. “What…?”

“Because if there was a chance and I *didn’t* take it, it would haunt me for the rest of my fucking life.” He smirked. “After all, you said it yourself—‘no greater love hath man than to lay down his life for a friend.’”

Even through the cotton haze, dread sank its icy claws straight through the gaps in Hannibal’s ribs. “No, Will…” He strained to move his heavy arm, but his fingers merely twitched. “Don’t…” he begged. “*Don’t*……”

Will huffed. “You won’t remember this. But when you do…” He clutched Hannibal’s neatly bandaged hand and repeatedly—*soothingly*—brushed his thumb across it. “This isn’t a death wish.”

Hannibal squinted with unfocused eyes. Amid the muffled, murky sounds are deep snaps of metal, groaning and creaking under an unfathomable pressure.

Breaking.

“Just a leap of faith.”

“Will…”

Hannibal felt Will’s hand begin to slip from his grasp. He tried to hold on, despite the burning stake through his palm, pinning him back.

Wait.

The hull splits. Frigid water floods in, roiling and famished.

“You once wondered if you could’ve done it, had our roles been reversed.” Will’s voice was a distant echo, spoken leagues beneath the sea. “If I had been the one to drown…could you have pulled me from the Atlantic?”

And there it was again.

That chilling, foreign sensation.

Uncertainty.

He hadn’t known what Cordell had administered, while his beloved—and all that mattered, the *only* one left who ever mattered—lay eerily still on the operating table.

Slipping from life before his very eyes.

Why aren’t you breathing?

It was here where his vast knowledge failed him. There were too many possibilities—exceptions and their nuances.

Seized by indecision, he froze.

Occam’s Razor, Hannibal.

Face riddled with spatters of dark blood and a second-degree burn still seething between his scapula, Hannibal met Will’s tired eyes.

Even then, you helped me…

Drifting in those gorgeous irises was only calm, reassuring acceptance.

Don’t overthink it.

Water rushes in.

A sob escapes Hannibal’s mouth as Will’s touch disintegrates to sand.

Don’t go.

Swept away by the current.

Don’t leave me…

This time, the taste is fresh and clean upon his tongue.

Please…!

“I have *huge* faith in you, Hannibal,” he had told him on the night of the sixth.

With that ethereal smile, Will held his beloved’s head in both hands and set the embers of his soul alight—as the only one who could in this vast, lonesome universe.

Raw, excruciating, and achingly alive.

Even then.

To partake in this love was to burn at the stake. Yet he’d scorch the heavens and raze Hell, if only to make it last a moment longer.

You always knew.

“…I always have.”

Hannibal’s feet hit sand.

58 seconds have passed since Will took his last breath.

Staggering and stumbling up the bank, Hannibal’s waterlogged shoes sink into mud as he hurriedly pulls his husband from the river’s hold. But a white-hot strike shoots up his right leg from his heel. With a gasp, Hannibal drops to his knees.

62 seconds.

Water still laps at Will’s legs.

Hannibal crawls to his side. Right palm on Will’s forehead—one scar grazing the other—he tilts Will’s head back, pinches his nose shut, and forces air into his still body.

Yet none of it reaches Will’s lungs.

Blaming himself, Hannibal tries again.

Nothing.

He immediately rolls Will onto his side. Hardly any water trickles out.

70 seconds.

He pushes Will onto his back and holds open his jaw. Even in the dead of night, he can tell nothing's been dislodged. Tongue isn't swallowed. There's no obstruction.

He again tilts Will's head back and pinches shut his nose.

Always.

He tries again.

You've always resisted me.

Again.

Occam's Razor.

A sob breaks from Hannibal's mouth.

82 seconds.

One option away from ripping out Will's throat, Hannibal grasps the base of Will's skull with both hands. Then he places the tips of his index fingers directly behind the base of Will's ears.

A leap of faith.

Larson's Maneuver.

For laryngospasm.

Dry drowning.

Hannibal presses in and tilts Will's head back.

Thumbs perched beneath Will's stubbled jaw, he feels that frail, fluttering heartbeat.

A bluebird's wings.

100 seconds.

Arrhythmia.

107.

Fleeing into silence.

112.

Hannibal releases his hold to close off Will's nose and open his jaw. He presses his mouth to Will's.

And breathes.

Air did reach Will's lungs then—merely 16 percent oxygen. When Hannibal pulled back between breaths, he noticed the gathering tears in Will's distant eyes.

Not blinking.

Hannibal's eyes rapidly flicked across Will's body, still strapped to that operating table.

Zero tension.

Not even the faintest twitch.

Dangling nearby, the line he had ripped from Will's forearm still dripped its clear liquid.

Don't overthink it.

He picked it up and held the end near his nose.

His mind couldn't pinpoint what it was, but he instantly ruled out poison. No anesthetics or analgesics would've been owed to the mad dog who bit 'til his teeth touched. Yet it wouldn't do having to rend the world's greatest medical miracle from a struggling, screaming canvas.

Hannibal's upper lip twitched.

...neuromuscular blockade.

He dropped the line and sealed his mouth over Will's. After the second breath, he stepped around Cordell's lake of blood and crossed over to that most detestable of pigs. He swiped the half-empty vial from the side table and hurriedly prepared a new syringe.

Enough was enough.

As the needle slipped into Will's arm, Hannibal gently passed his fingers down Will's eyelids, closing them.

To anyone else, it would have appeared as though nothing had changed. Yet Hannibal knew —profoundly so, by the way the worsening ache spread from his own chest to wallow in his throat—that this meant the world to Will.

Finally.

Hannibal observed the dripping slice in front of Will's left ear.

And the bullet wound in his right shoulder and the jagged cut across his forehead—all never meant to heal.

The one across his stomach that did.

Hannibal leaned over. His lips hovering over Will's, he hesitated.

He hoped it was enough time for the anesthetic to fully take hold.

Then he applied two more breaths. As he pulled away, he let his hand drop to Will's sweat-drenched hair. He brushed it back and allowed his fingers to card through those untamable locks.

Comforting him.

…thank you……

Despite knowing that Will felt none of it, the reverse was true as well.

Finally…

There was no pain.

Upon seeing Will's chest rise, Hannibal immediately gives him another breath. The rush of hope hits him like a spear through his lungs.

It hurts.

Oh, how it hurts…

Because Will doesn't wake.

120 seconds.

Eyes squeezed shut and burning, Hannibal overlaps both hands and pushes the heel of his palm hard into Will's sternum.

29.

30.

Jaw thrust, seal the nose, two breaths.

Thirty compressions.

Again.

Again…

How he *hates* this…

This brutality.

The indignity.

A Hell of his own making.

But when he reaches thirty, he again gives Will two breaths as despair gives way to rage.

Not this. You can't *have this.*

It's spiteful and petty and selfish.

It's the truth.

Hannibal realized it the moment he saw his ring in Matthew Brown's hand.

I'd let you have anything.

Do anything.

Anything but this……

`only a figment`

Mischa

Hannibal hardly hears the click of the hammer through the deafening sounds of his heaving chest.

"Only you would be so cruel," she says, voice level, "as to force him back to a world without you."

Lips grazing Will's, Hannibal falters.

He closes his eyes.

Drops slip down the sharp creases of his face. Vainly blinking through the distortion, he can just make out that ethereal silhouette, perfectly framed in the light of the two-story window.

All around them exists their time—meticulously crafted evidence of that painfully short intersection of their lives.

That ephemeral nature.

Trembling, Hannibal holds out his hand. His fingers split the golden rays.

He staggers forth but gets no closer. Step after step, he tries and tries until, finally, he drops to his knees.

Beneath him dances the skeleton, graven in the floor.

Their single reminder.

Hannibal's right hand gravitates toward his left. He clutches the platinum ring—feels the two consuming snakes.

His promise.

Such *inconvenient* compassion.

Pure empathy.

Love.

"Is this…what you want, Will?"

Hannibal's voice is scarcely a whisper. Grief tumbles, relentless, from his pleading eyes.

But Will doesn't turn to face him.

With hardly a twitch of his neck, Hannibal shakes his head.

"There's still so much—" He chokes. It takes everything to stamp down that eternal sorrow.

No greater pain.

Yet staring into that burning light, he can't help the jagged smile that inevitably tugs on the corner of his lips. As he basks in the glow of that majestic radiance, pride and unfathomable reverence swell deep within his breaking chest.

Here Will stands, victorious.

"What do you see?" slips from Hannibal's mouth, eyes wide with wonder.

Curious.

Kneeling in the quiet shallows of the river, Hannibal gathers up his husband and draws him into a tender embrace.

Will's fingers twitch.

A hairline fracture forms in the centermost pane. The sound of crackling sharpens as it spreads.

It's then that Will blinks. He glances over his shoulder against the growing web of shards.

Hundreds upon thousands of fissures split every last inch of glass.

Hannibal…?

Then the windows erupt in a great cascade of sparkling shards. With a roar, the wind charges in. Red-white curtains thrash and nearly rip from the bar.

Outside, countless branches crash together like waves on a cliffside. All around them rush leaves of blood and gold.

As Alana steps closer, Hannibal tucks Will's head beneath his chin.

And there against the flood of ash and buckling pillars…

Buried deep below a rooftop cast upon pleas for mercy…

He hears a single knock back from the once silent rubble.

A pulse.

An answer.

Another.

Another—

Lazarus heart.

Hannibal freezes. In all his time as an emergency room surgeon, he never saw it.

As mythical as the golden hour.

Yet eyes closed, he now listens to that beautiful, miraculous thrum of blood.

Agonal, his rib cage convulses once.

Fighting on and on.

The faintest stridor escapes his parted mouth.

As he did on the longest night.

Then a breath.

And how they've cherished that borrowed time, ever since.

A gasp.

Hannibal smiles.

Hello, Will.

As cold metal grazes his temple, he asks.

……was it beautiful?

On the first day of Fall, Will opens his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Of course he would restart his heart for Hannibal.

In Some Other World

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional warnings:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What if no one has to die?" Will asked, seated with his hands clasped and his back to the cupboards.

On the floor of Hannibal's kitchen.

"What if…we can leave together?"

Forearms resting on his knees, Hannibal was seated to Will's left and leaned the back of his head on his fridge. "Do you fear death, Will?"

"Don't we all?"

"I find it comforting."

Will blinked. He stared at the dry floorboards where a gutted stag once bled out. "*Beauty on the threshold to death.*"

"Yes."

Facing forward, Will gnawed at his lower lip. "Except when it's *my* head on the chopping block. At least, as of late."

Hannibal turned to look at him. Deep in his warm brown eyes was that persistent ache, the only remedy being the very sight of his beloved. "I have no doubt you will meet your mortality with beauty and grace." He faced forward and closed his eyes. "Comfort is in the ceasing of your suffering."

"Sweet and easy peace," Will murmured. Then he snapped his eyes shut and winced at the sudden strike of phantom pain across his abdomen.

That curved blade split the two halves of his flesh, shattering him.

With the bloodied knife still grasped in his fist, Hannibal held those razor-sharp pieces together and repeatedly stroked the back of Will's head.

A futile, self-soothing gesture.

Will gripped the gaping smile as his back hit the cabinet. His life flowed hot and heavy past his gnarled fingers and down his lap.

Through agony, he reached out, and that dream slipped from life beneath his palm.

He let her go.

While the sound of Hannibal's footsteps grew fainter, Will lowered his head. "I could've died," he said, voice low, yet frail and strangled, "and you wouldn't have been there."

You could have accompanied Abigail.

Hannibal could have spoken.

I left you with Jack and Alana, the ones you had chosen.

He could have said it.

It was surgical.

But in the darkness, all Will heard was silence. As the pain ebbed and the walls fell away, he leaned forward to run both hands down his face.

Centuries of prayers, remorse, repentance, and bitter truths lingered in the dusty air.

I never considered having a child, echoed that notion.

But after meeting Abigail, I understood the appeal—the opportunity to guide and support, and in many ways, direct a life.

They had both thought it.

From his place seated on the steps of their chapel, Will lifted his head and gazed past the dancing skeleton and the rows of empty wooden chairs.

"I'm sorry I took that from you," Hannibal said, now seated on the steps to Will's right.

"…from both of us," Will corrected.

Head bowed, Hannibal took a slow breath. Then he stated, "You can still go back, if there's any point."

"To captivity?"

Hannibal kept his eyes to the exquisite mosaics graven in the floor. "You will never again know freedom, but you will live."

I think of my earliest memory and project forward to what I imagine will be my death.

I never think about living beyond that span of time.

Except…

Will stared straight ahead as the understanding solemnly clicked into place. “Dead men tell no tales.”

Hannibal nodded. “In surviving, you’ll be our only witness.” He slowly turned to look at Will. “…to do—and rewrite—as you please.”

The final say.

The last laugh.

“And if I were to die before you?” Will asked, already knowing the answer.

Hannibal parted his mouth. He closed it and opened it once more before he finally confessed, “I know now…that I *can* survive separation.”

“And loss?”

“I’d…” The words died in Hannibal’s throat, but he tried again. “In remembering you, honoring you…”

Missing you.

“…I can take solace in knowing the burden lies with me.”

“How compassionate,” Will murmured.

Hannibal nodded once. “I never once considered that my death would be mourned as profoundly as I mourned Mischa’s.”

Will sighed. “I didn’t think my whole self could be so thoroughly loved either.”

The subtlest smile graced Hannibal’s lips. “As you said, you are as alone as I am. We’re both alone without each other.”

Sensing the air transform around them—to that familiar, comfortable warmth—Will opened his eyes to see his fiancé seated across from him. The fireplace crackled softly to his right.

Dressed in his favorite gray and blood-red suit, Hannibal’s legs were crossed, as always, and he stared back at Will from his chair with that unerring intensity and obsession.

Love and intrigue.

Leaning forward with both elbows on his knees, Will—in that iconic salmon shirt—eyed the platinum engagement ring.

“Just as well,” Will remarked. A wicked smile flickered across his face when Hannibal’s eyes inevitably averted to that first part of their contract. “For as long as I live, I won’t let you have *anything* in your life that’s not me.”

“Just as well,” Hannibal agreed, perfectly reflecting that smile and sentiment. After a pause, which Will caught as the faintest hint of bashful hesitation, Hannibal set aside his wine glass and leaned forward to also clasp his hands over his knees. “Even after an eternity, would you not grow bored of me?”

“Never,” Will answered immediately.

Resolutely.

He looked at Hannibal with a soft fondness in his stormy eyes. “Even after an eternity, we’d still have much to do.”

Hannibal nodded. The gravity of that truth settling with the dust, he sat with his eyes downcast and with the most endearing, content smile written plainly on his face.

Once the overwhelming affection faded to a tolerable level, Hannibal locked eyes with his beloved and asked, “Do you believe in life after death?”

In some other worlds, not all paths diverged. Most converged, as fate would have it. Parting and reconvening again, the same sentiments and conclusions would come into existence at similar points in the river.

Forgiveness, epiphanies, and an understanding so profound, its knowledge echoed on through space—unfathomable and incomprehensible.

Backwards, forwards…

All in due time.

It didn’t matter how they got there, so long as they arrived together.

Now, here they were, in the only place they could make for themselves in *all* worlds.

Proudly eyeing the platinum engagement ring on Hannibal’s left finger—how hilarious had his face been when Will had suddenly dropped to one knee, effectively beating the complacent cannibal to the punch—Will answered:

“Convince me.”

Then a crooked, knowing smile stretched across Will’s face, wrinkling the beautiful scar on his right cheek, as it did in many realities.

“And if it’s true…” he continued, as Hannibal smiled back with the utmost confidence and hellfire stoked in his shadowed eyes.

Then I shall love you better after death.

Every nerve shocked alight in his body.

In this world.

Despite respiratory arrest—*cardiac* arrest—it was as if a switch had been flipped, reigniting the supercharged current between those billions of neurons.

There was no conscious awareness behind his actions.

Only instinct.

And why the phone records showed that he had called, and why he didn't shoot him in his own kitchen, and why the Dragon had turned…

Like cells withdrawing from fatal stimuli, he shot up as if from flames.

The collision of skull and mandible activated another response—a memory.

A chasm spliced together in the hall of his mind. There, he simply crossed without so much as a hitch in his step. Here, his hands flew up and braced.

Covered. Shielded. They were falling, *falling*—

To…

It had been well practiced. Well trained.

Repetition and the ability to visualize with astounding clarity, sharper than actual sight, and perhaps even able to know that which is physically impossible for human eyes.

He had known, for a long time, that this was coming. And as endeavored, he did not wait for Death's first move. He started forth and fought—with vicious wrath and calculated control.

For this was everything.

Everything that ever was.

And always will be.

As the spray of water bursts into the shallows, Alana watches them hit the riverbank.

Will's mouth is parted. He must have cried out, but it was lost in the roar of gunpowder and the deafening ring in their ears. When the ground resolutely stops their descent, he stares wide-eyed down the shoreline.

Rapidly flicking to and fro, his eyes appear distant and unfocused. His entire body is shivering, in shock. Yet he slowly drags his arms through—*sand*—mud—*salt*—

A quiet stream.

Head only slightly elevated, his fingers curl into the soft, damp fabric on Hannibal's shoulders. At last, he registers that achingly familiar body, now entirely beneath him.

Will struggles to brace his left elbow in the saturated mud and relieve just a bit of the pressure off Hannibal. But as the angle minutely increases, Will abruptly freezes.

Fear.

Even in the darkness, his peripherals see Hannibal lying still beneath him.

And he doesn't dare look up.

Can't *bear* to.

But his hands inevitably work their way to the sides of Hannibal's head. Fingers slowly rake through the thin wisps of damp hair, along the smooth contour of his skull.

And he sees, through touch, neither the presence of sharp scratches from fragmented bone nor the viscosity of precious gray matter spilling to the floor.

No blood.

His thumbs pass down those cheekbones and his palms cradle his jaw.

And only then does he fully push himself on his right elbow to look.

Eyes closed, Hannibal lies beneath him. Will brushes a quaking hand across Hannibal's forehead, molding back the wayward strands. There's a flicker of movement in the eyelids and then the faintest quirk in his lips. As if coaxing, Will continues to instinctively caress down the sides of Hannibal's face and brush back his hair.

Finally, those deep-set eyes open.

Only halfway, yet his dazed pupils find Will and his stiffened arms gradually ease onto his beloved's back.

Also instinctual.

At the touch of Hannibal's hands, Will's shivering abruptly ceases. A gasp escapes Will's throat. He snaps his eyes shut and dips his chin to press his forehead to Hannibal's.

The overwhelming relief that crashes over him—*both* of them, with Hannibal's jaw quivering at the undeniable sight of Will's clear eyes and vivid cognizance from a present, undamaged mind—is as palpable as sinking into a warm bath after an impossible escape from Winter's Atlantic.

And perhaps even fished from the unearthly depths of an eternal, frozen lake in Hell.

Here, together, they know they can weather the storm.

As his frantic breaths soften to steadiness, Will turns his head to touch his temple to Hannibal's. Then with a pained grimace, he braces both hands onto the riverbank and drags himself further up shore. He doesn't stop until Hannibal is completely shielded beneath him.

Hannibal can only cling to the edges of Will's sleeves.

Although she had stepped back, the sights of Alana's gun never wavered from her target. Nor did her eyes, as she witnessed the greatest authenticity unfold before her and dispel all preconceived notions.

Despite their brutality and darkness, their petty vengefulness and conniving manipulations…

This was honest.

Beautiful.

"Get out of the way, Will."

Alana's voice is even and tempered while her finger remains on the trigger.

Of course, he remains, his head resting between the barrel and the path to his beloved's brain.

Alana shakes her head, at last feeling the sting of emotion pricking her eyes—stoked embers in a long dormant hearth.

Not anger.

The warmth feels good. Alive.

She hasn't felt it since succumbing to numbness under the pouring, icy rain.

From the barren earth sprouts that delicate sprig of zest.

"This is *not* your fight," she tells him.

Will slowly tilts his head to look at her. Through damp mussed hair, those striking gray eyes bore directly into hers.

How peculiar is what she sees.

Despite the quiet ferocity, the evolution, the revelation…

He's still there.

That standoffish spectacled lecturer, who would refuse to make eye contact.

A profiler who harnessed pure empathy to save countless lives.

Who secretly craved killing.

Who spent hours on the side of a dark road, despite a headache and a long commute from the airport, coaxing a lost dog to safety.

A lonely man who once longed to be a father.

Who, in a desperate reach for normalcy, once tried to misplace his wayward affections in her.

Her enemy.

Her friend.

Through the years.

At the close of summer, he would speed-walk his way through campus and take shortcuts through dying grass and fallen leaves, with glasses halfway down his nose and eyes glued to the floor. She'd watch him carve his way through the masses, and she'd smirk at his odd yet endearing choice of a plaid shirt, drab sport coat, and tie. Her greetings and goodbyes were always met with no more than a half-second side-eye and a nod.

Never spoken.

"We're here because I wanted to *save you*," she says, despite already knowing he is wholly, profoundly empathizing.

In the dead of night, a thin line of gold passes over his eyes.

She blinks, and it's gone.

"Had our places been reversed, you'd let him kill me?" She raises her voice somewhat. "My wife, my *child*?"

"Could…one day…the darkness so consume me that I would?" Will asks, voice low and ragged. Then he drops his chin to rest it on the top of Hannibal's head. "Perhaps."

Alana grits her teeth behind closed lips. "That your roundabout way of claiming you're still of sound mind? Within reason?"

At that, Will lifts both eyebrows while staring blankly downstream and cradling his husband beneath him. "…Try me."

Alana takes a sharp breath.

Having been silenced by the single gunshot, the chirps of crickets begin to emerge. Tentative, at first, they bravely resume their nightly performance.

Every minute counts in this dwindling time.

As if placated by the sound, she slightly lowers her arm. “Are you…happy, Will?” she asks, hardly a whisper. “I know what I’ve seen.” She swallows, recalling Death in his destructive wake and all the scattered pieces she had tried to gather. “I need to hear it.”

Will’s chest rose as he took a deep, shuddering breath.

On the night of the full moon, they had circled like the wolves they truly were. A single look. The charge. The rip of flesh, how easily it split. Great gouts of scalding blood.

A spreading pool of red wings.

Black in the moonlight, how intriguing was the ink coating his hand and trickling down his forearm. He took Hannibal’s hand. Hardly able to stand, he staggered closer, fingers clawing into his shoulder.

This is all I ever wanted for you.

God, how he looked, mouth coated in black blood, while more overflowed from Will’s own.

For both of us.

Will smiled.

Through the terrible agony and the peculiar sensation of his chuckle also escaping the side of his face, he looked deep into those achingly honest eyes and—at long last—understood.

He recanted the lie he once told Abigail.

“It was the most beautiful thing in the world.”

Will leaned his head on Hannibal’s chest and lost himself in that steady heartbeat.

Euphoric.

Horrific.

“Then why cast yourselves off the cliff?” She quirks her head. “Walking would’ve saved you a whole *lot* of trouble.”

Will smirks, then.

For countless nights he had mulled that moment.

Because it was right? To save lives? To burn Pandora’s Box before the worst calamity drew breath?

To ensure his thoughts were fully his, Will hid himself away, each night, in the one place Hannibal would never go—among the snails and hollow, drafty halls.

…or so he thought until he witnessed that mournful farewell on the night of their wedding. But Hannibal never dared venture inside the castle.

Nor has he again entered the gates.

Will didn't want death. Yet if it chose him, he would go willingly.

But…what had happened just now?

Was I…?

You came back…

Seated in his chair among the sea of shards and scattered autumn leaves, Will glances down upon feeling a firm pressure to his lap. Hannibal is on his bloodstained knees in the biting glass. Shoes fanned out to the side, he faces outward while resting the side of his head on Will's thigh, ear just below the through-and-through scar. His left hand is perched on Will's right knee.

With nothing to stop it, a gentle breeze rattles the curtains.

The once blinding golden light has dimmed to a waning bronze.

As Will observes the lengthening shadows, it occurs to him that those "gates" may be closing on him for good.

You stayed…

No matter.

Stay…

Will…

Will quiets him by steadily running his palm from the crown of Hannibal's head to the jutting knobs at the nape of his neck, like smoothing down bristling hackles on fur.

Well done, Hannibal.

Will breathes through the sore ache in his chest, which radiates from his sternum to his bruised heart. In due time, he will know exactly what took place in this newest shared room —a muddy riverbank beneath a star-crossed, moonless sky.

As for now…

To the Devil his due.

The shallows still lapping at their legs, Will slowly lifts his head to meet Alana's cold, sapphire blue.

"Que sera…sera," he manages to make his broken body say, the faintest smile tugging on his bruised lips.

What will be, will be.

They stare directly into each other's eyes.

Then the gun's aim lowers to the ground. It rests down at her side, though her finger remains grazing the trigger.

"Molly's been finding more strays," she says, solemn. "Lately, some of the old pack has been staying with me so that she can foster the 'problem' cases. She stays for lunch, sometimes."

With hardly a twitch of his head, Will nods. Molly always did have a craving for a good ham sandwich, or bacon and eggs, pulled pork…

Alana takes several steps forward and lowers to a crouch. Face-to-face, she briefly raises her brow. "You know what this means, right?" Then her eyes flick to Hannibal. "I was hoping we wouldn't have to say goodbye. Nothing seen, nor said.

"…But perhaps you would've found that rude."

Will stares back, unblinking.

"You can still hide from this," she clarifies, with the slightest flippant edge to her words. "I can call it off, this whole thing." She takes a sharp breath. "But you died in the Atlantic, Will, when you chose *him*." She locks eyes with Will's. "*Every* moment *since*...has been borrowed.

"Your ex-wife, her son, your dogs, your *husband*…" Her voice somewhat trails off as her focus briefly strays to their rings. Then, devoid of any and all malice, fear, or desperation, she declares, with a soft smile:

"*They belong to me.*"

Will's eyes flick away. When at last the implication sets root in the center of his mind, a crooked grin breaks across his face. "…a bargain for Hannibal's life."

She nods. "The finest gold I can spin for you." Then she glances away with a sigh. "You better be grateful. I'm missing my son's birthday party for this *shit*."

"Couldn't you just…have another one?"

With a wrinkle in her brow, she shakes her head. "It's too much of a pain to schedule theme park reservations, private jets, accommodations, security, cake… But we'll have a small family one when I get back."

Will drops his head and nods. Eyes distant, his mind buzzes in a floating daze. And yet, he would be hard-pressed to say it was a *complete* surprise. Despite the trauma of existing in a world not meant for her, she still retained that innermost truth to her soul. Much like his own, it had managed to survive the landing, after all.

As their tone falls back into their old dynamic, Will's words escape through their own accord. "So how's, uh……"

Alana stares wide-eyed as the silence stretches on.

And *on*.

Will shuts his damn mouth.

And finally, a real smile cracks upon her face. “Did you forget her *name*?”

Will laughs. Though his rib cage feels like it’s been run over by a truck and his left ankle as if bitten by a shark, the genuine levity feels good in his battered lungs.

Just sweet and easy peace.

Through his own embarrassed glee, he can hear her laughing too.

“That’s *bad,*” she chides.

“It was a wonderful 30-second-stand…”

Showing teeth in her smile, Alana shakes her head as she rises. “Doesn’t sound too good for your sex life.”

Hannibal parts his mouth.

Will immediately clamps his hand over it and blurts, “*I’ll take it.* The deal.”

The wrinkles near her eyes deepen with her amusement. But the levity soon fades when her focus strays to the cliff.

She sighs.

“I’ll be happy to vouch for your insanity ‘til the end of time,” she says. “I think it’s true, after all. But no amount of bribery will make your problems go away. I’m afraid there’s not much else I can do.”

They wouldn’t keep you together, goes unsaid, though they *all* heard it.

No visits.

Reluctantly, her eyes momentarily flick to the gun still in her hand.

There are shouts in the distance.

Sirens.

A helicopter.

“It’s fine…” Will breathes.

Alana nods. She holsters the gun and turns to depart for the forest. But she pauses several steps in and glances over her shoulder.

Will had removed his miraculously unbitten hand and dropped his head to rest it beside Hannibal's. Seized by utter exhaustion, both their beaten bodies lie pitifully in the upturned mud.

"Goodbye… Alana…" Will murmurs. Though his eyes are closed, a soft, grateful smile graces the corner of his lips.

"Goodbye, Will," she answers.

In her voice was all the warmth and care she could offer to her dear, departed friend. And with it went the burden of all the obsessive guilt and sleepless nights concerning his fate.

Her actions.

It only worsened following their escape, the stress perhaps taking several years off her lifespan.

Of Hannibal finding her.

Of condemning Will to immeasurable cruelty.

In the end, she finally saw, with eyes unclouded…

Definitive victory.

With those parting words, she washed her hands of them once and for all. A simple task, thanks to the lack of spilt blood.

Heart light and conscience clear, she thought of nothing else than the anticipation of kissing Margot's knowing smile, listening to her son's excited retellings, and, of course, greeting Applesauce, whose enthusiasm would not be hindered by stiff joints, as the old girl raced down the halls to see her.

All was as it should be.

Que sera, sera.

Once Alana's footsteps fade to silence, Will releases a long breath as he rolls onto his back. At last, all the tension eases from his shoulders.

He feels tired.

So achingly tired.

Yet his right hand inevitably finds Hannibal's left, and his fingers curl into the warm palm.

Hannibal's eyes are closed.

"Hey," Will wheezes, with hardly any air to back it. "Still with me…?" He squeezes Hannibal's hand.

After a long second, Will feels those fingers twitch and then firmly, yet fleetingly, close tight around his.

It's all he can do.

The corner of Will's mouth perks. He releases another breath while closing his heavy eyelids. After several more breaths, he asks, "Did you…?" But the words die in his throat.

The silence is deafening.

Of *course* Hannibal did already, the impatient bastard.

Will runs his tongue along the back of his molars.

Still there.

Somehow.

While a relief, the slightest bit of trepidation pools cold in his stomach. But sheer exhaustion blunts most of it.

What choice do they have?

Yet, perhaps this is simply Hannibal's way of forcing Will to decide for himself.

You can go back…

The sirens and thundering helicopter near ever closer. Beyond the crest of the waterfall, he sees the faint glow of blue and red in the cascading mist.

It's time.

Will holds the capsule between his teeth.

Do you believe in life after death?

Their hands still clasped, he turns to look at Hannibal. But as he studies those beautiful, reposed features, he catches sight of the mountain range, worn sharp from eons of rain.

And beyond, looms the universe and its dazzling expanse of stars.

Freedom.

Unreachable except to his eyes, Will meticulously paints this sight in perfect detail on the walls of their latest room.

He constructs it just as Hannibal once did, with the delicate point of a brush, while his beloved perfectly illustrated the memory of finding the North Star from the sea of grass.

Here, on the night of the new moon that preludes the first daybreak of Fall, Altair and Vega glimmer brightly at the close of their season.

Yet at this particular time, place, and tilt of the axis, Will witnesses both of them touch down on the peaks of the jagged horizon. What flows between them is no longer a river.

It's a waterfall.

Altair and Vega wade from the stream, following their long descent.

Though badly shaken from their vicious fall from Heaven, they cautiously emerge onto shore, only to find themselves on the same plane of existence.

The same world.

At 12:59 AM, they arrived on Earth, together.

Chapter End Notes

Was absolutely listening to this amazing orchestration of "The Great Gig in the Sky" while writing this.

After, Life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been a fight to get them.

Accompanied only by the hum of the AC, Zeller sits in a daze beside the body bag on the table.

There's something so putrid about the one they used—black with a bit of sheen to it. He divulged to no one, but this type has always reminded him of a cocoon.

It's one that hadn't made it, lying blackened and shriveled on the forest floor. Staring at the opaque outer casing, he already knows what abomination rots within, now frozen in mid-metamorphosis.

Reminded of human nature's morbid curiosity, it had been his call to move to the basement. Upstairs had heightened to a frenzy, even among the supposed professionals, when the external exam commenced.

Everyone wanted to touch greatness.

Or at least get a peek.

He probably should have known that would happen when the clothes came off. But it was easy to forget their "celebrity" status, having known them.

Worked with them.

Not to mention how their shirts were already in tatters from the free-for-all by the Cuban river last night.

The moment Miriam's distress call had went out, seemingly ordinary people, from all walks of life and all parts of earth, went from milling around the fringes to flooring it toward the little cottage on the cliffs.

Some were astute enough to head for the forest below. Of course, Zeller was one such person.

But nothing could've prepared him for the hordes of scavengers who, ravenous and ever-vigilant, also converged on the river. After getting stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic in this remote tropical rainforest, Zeller grabbed a flashlight, hopped out of his car, and followed the sound of water.

They first scoured the basin, but Zeller raced past all of them. Though not as vivid as that prodigy of a profiler, he too turned back time and retraced their likely path.

There was no escaping the whitewater rapids. So he continued to run, ducking under branches and hopping over roots as he went. Gradually, the river widened and welled into a gentle bend.

At the furthest point was a dark break in the glassy shoreline.

He barely got a glimpse of the untouched scene.

They were lying halfway in the shallows—Hannibal on his back and Will turned toward him with his left arm draped across Hannibal's chest.

Unmoving and silent.

His wedding ring gleamed under the flashlight's ray.

Barely five seconds had passed before the vultures swooped in. Shoved aside by the mob, Zeller could do nothing but watch the frenzied desecration of this gravesite.

Vandalizing art.

But just when it seemed the two were destined to be torn apart, a helicopter roared in its arrival above the thrashing treetops. Dressed in tactical gear and baring rifles, its occupants leaned out the open side doors in a clear show of force. But the bounty hunters were more preoccupied with bracing against the gale force winds and stinging hail of debris.

And through the cacophony and whipping spray, Zeller felt his phone buzz once from within his pocket.

He pulled it out and squinted at the screen.

From Alana.

Get in.

First to arrive in the basement, Zeller switched on the lights in the dusty, defunct morgue. To think, the last time this was used was for the overflow of totem pole bodies.

As the assistants vacated the room, he couldn't help but swivel his head toward the cross-armed figure looming in his peripherals.

Something wrong with the meat.

Eyes averting to the wall of stainless steel doors, Zeller sighs and again shifts in his chair. The clock on the wall is stuck at six past six, and the sallow-stained, tiled interior is an eerie relic from the bygone century.

Classic horror game setup.

Zeller repeatedly glances at his phone while he fidgets. Of all times, he doesn't understand why this annoying chill of paranoia has suddenly decided to plague him. Death and the abundance of serial killers in his backyard have never phased him, which was a trait he flaunted whenever starry-eyed students would shadow him in the field or during an autopsy.

Things would catch him off-guard, here and there. But truly disturb him?

Only the sight and smell of Bev's melted slices did that.

And it's that rush of hatred that finally pushes Zeller from his seat. Already wearing gloves, he harshly unzips the body bag.

Stark against the synthetic shell of the chrysalis, the skin is pale under the cold fluorescent light. Zeller stares at that infamous face.

There's something so petty and spiteful about having this ability to look without being seen. And he can't deny the satisfaction of witnessing this once pompous devil-incarnate now silenced by death and reduced to mere flesh and bone.

Free to be dissected—picked apart and packed away, as was once done to countless victims.

Zeller begins to lay out the various tools—forceps, scalpels, bone saw. Although he didn't use any excessive force, the clangs atop the side table seem absurdly loud in the quiet ambience.

He doesn't know why he's suddenly feeling that old sensation of sneaking around his childhood home in the dead of night, when every squeaky hinge was amplified to the nth degree.

It's then that the hallway doors decide to burst open.

Zeller jumps at the sound. His back to the swinging double doors, he places a hand to his thundering chest as Jimmy bumbles in.

"Got caught up in the grid lock," he explains with a huff while hurriedly hanging up his coat and tossing aside his messenger bag. "It's a jungle out there! Police, the press, *fans*…! The 'pretty privilege' knows no bounds!" He pulls on his gloves with a snap. "But y'know…" He grins bashfully. "One of them asked for my autograph."

"Oh, jeez…" Stifling a smile, Zeller shakes his head. "At least it wasn't a selfie."

But he notices Jimmy avoiding eye contact while making his way to the examination table.

"You took a—"

"*Yes,* we took a selfie," Jimmy admits. "But *only* one."

Zeller blinks. Somewhere on the interwebs is a poorly lit, fish-eyed selfie featuring Jimmy, beaming and making a peace sign, while on his way to slice up his nemesis.

“All right,” Jimmy exhales as he joins him on the opposite side of the table. The levity gone, he meets Zeller’s eyes. “Ready?”

The glaring conflict of interest is more than criminal. But it’s also clear that, concerning *this* case, all semblance of proper protocol had long gone out the window.

“Do what you will and make it go away,” were essentially their orders.

Together, they roll Hannibal onto his side. Zeller holds him in place while Jimmy removes the bag. Once free, they push him onto his back. Then, by grabbing a fistful of hair, Zeller lifts Hannibal’s head and roughly drops it onto the metal support Jimmy placed below.

Zeller gazes tiredly at his coworker’s horrified face. “Seriously?”

Jimmy fidgets. “Look, it’s just, uh……” His eyes wander.

“He’s *dead*.” And to prove his point, Zeller picks up Hannibal’s right arm. “*Complete* rigor mortis on the flight back.” Then releases the flaccid appendage, which hits the table with a loud thump. “Now passed.”

Jimmy flinches as he stares at Hannibal.

All of him.

Then, after a long moment of jittering, he turns away. “Maybe we should cover him up.”

“*What—”* Zeller abruptly crosses around the table and grabs Jimmy by the sleeve. “No! What’re you—?!”

“*OK!* Ok, fine.” Jimmy whips around and lets out a sigh. “It’s… Have you *seen* that Tattle Crime article?”

Zeller blinks. “Jim.”

He winces. “I know. Bad memories… BUT.” He takes a breath. “In the one she posted this morning, it had a voice recording of Will—from when he had kidnapped her in Cuba before he *himself* got kidnapped—which contained a message to be released *only* in the event of their deaths and—”

“Jimmy, what—”

“It’s a *curse*!” Jimmy blurts. “Whoever disrespects them in death shall be visited by a *blight upon thee*!”

Zeller’s mouth hangs open in the silence.

Jimmy anxiously glances over his shoulder at the wall of square doors. “Where’s Will?”

“In the pantry.”

Jimmy faces Zeller and narrows his eyes. “Normally, I’m perfectly sensible and grounded in reality as you are, but you *can’t* deny there are things in this world that *defy* explanation.” He gestures to Hannibal, still lying pale and motionless on the table. “*Especially him*!”

Zeller holds back the outburst in the back of his throat. It’s then that utter exhaustion hits him like a ton of bricks. He’s hardly eaten and surely hasn’t slept in at least a day. Now that he thinks of it, he had been on Cuban soil a mere eighteen hours ago. 24 hours ago, he had been in Baltimore, paying his respects to the site of Bev’s final battleground.

Thirty hours ago, he’d been emptying his drawers in search of his passport.

Zeller pinches the bridge of his nose with his gloved fingers. “Let’s just get this over with and then grab a drink…” He places his palm on Jimmy’s shoulder. “For Bev.”

Jimmy flicks his eyes to the floor. Then he brushes off Zeller’s hand and takes his place beside the table. “Maybe we can thin slice his brain,” he mutters. “Put them on little slides, like Einstein’s.”

“That’s the spirit.”

They finish the external exam in silence, which was only a rudimentary noting of his scars, wondering how he possibly survived that bullet wound through his gut, and not seeing any obvious causes of death. Aside from confirming that he took self-care *very* seriously, there’s only slight discoloration to his upper body due to antemortem bruising.

Obviously, he had drowned.

Unless…

The pen light passes over those jagged shark’s teeth.

“I think he took something.”

While holding the light, Zeller frowns as he watches Jimmy take the swab. “No way, really?”

Jimmy squints as he prods around the left molars. “I’m seeing remnants of…some kind of adhesive substance…” He cranes his neck to get a better angle. “Like dental glue.” Then he removes the elongated cotton swab from Hannibal’s mouth and places it in a test tube.

Lost in thought, Zeller clicks off the flashlight.

Jimmy’s hand inadvertently leans on Hannibal’s chest as he passes it to Zeller. “I mean, guess we’ll see if this returns as cyani—”

Suddenly, Jimmy jolts and staggers back with a gasp. The test tube shatters across the tile.

“*His heart’s beating.”*

Zeller stares at Jimmy. “He was in rigor—”

“His heart’s *beating!”* he shouts.

As the echo lingers in the room, they stand stock still. Yet Hannibal remains eerily still as well.

After a long pause, Zeller glacially flattens his palm over the left pectoral.

Sure enough, he feels that knock back—slow, yet steady and undeniable.

And in stark contrast to his own tachycardia.

Zeller removes his hand and takes a step back.

He knows he could—and *should*—check for a carotid pulse.

But he doesn’t.

Instead, they merely stare. Bits of glass are still scattered beneath the exam table.

Recalling the turducken lady, Jimmy asks, “You think he swallowed a fish?”

Zeller grabs a scalpel.

And no sooner has he picked it up does a deafening bang make both of them jump.

They turn to the wall of doors.

The middle one lurches with another violent clash.

Again and again with growing strength, the metal lurches and bends until, finally, the lock gives out and the dented hatch whips open. The force sends it bouncing off the neighboring door.

With a screech, the tray wheels out, and from beneath the white shroud…

…rises the ghost.

“Are you familiar with the phrase, ‘saved by the bell’?”

From his place reclined on his beach towel, Will responded with a sigh.

The day after Hannibal’s hangover, the call of the sea had proven too great. Will had wondered if the smell of salt and sound of crashing waves would stir up old monsters from

the abyss—of burning lungs, bitter numbness, the shoreline so hopelessly far while the Atlantic threatened to rend Hannibal from his grasp.

But the warmth had made all the difference.

In the late morning of the third day of Spring, the sun beat down on their exposed backs. Will smiled at the luxurious sensation. There was not a cloud in the sky as they walked barefoot along the white sand in only swim trunks, sunglasses, and an ample coating of sunscreen.

After a minute, they arrived at a suitable patch, clear of any twigs or rocks, and set down their towels and picnic basket.

Instead of the engulfing roar that, every now and again, would echo down their palace corridors, the crystal blue waves lapped softly in this cove-like beach.

While Hannibal was occupied with setting up an umbrella, Will settled onto his beach towel and drank in their surroundings.

How idyllic were the leaning palm trees and sparkling waters blanketing a pale golden shore.

It was paradise.

All chosen with care.

When he glanced down at the latest scar through his thigh, sentiment inevitably stung his eyes.

Like their "happy hour" two nights ago, this was yet another reward, courtesy of Hannibal.

For surviving.

Staying.

After a particularly strenuous day of rehab, Will had hobbled his way down to the yacht's cabin. He set aside the makeshift crutch and, with a loud sigh, collapsed onto his side of the bed. Then he strained to shift into a comfortable position.

Even with his eyes closed, he could feel Hannibal's stare on him—burning as he documented each change in the fresh scar tissue and latest assessment of pain.

Seven was his conclusion.

Will heard a drawer open.

"No," he wheezed out. "I don't need it."

Hannibal paused. "You need to sleep."

"I don't…*want* it," Will repeated, each word methodical.

And after a tense several seconds, Will heard him set down the syringe and close the drawer. The mattress dipped to his right.

Then Hannibal shifted and that heavy arm reached over and draped across Will's chest.

His hand slid past Will's heart to hook over the left trapezius. Then Hannibal's mouth gently pressed to Will's right shoulder. Held in this embrace, Will fleetingly opened his eyes at the touch.

"I've found ourselves a place," Hannibal murmured, voice a low rumble, as often happened when he was on the verge of sleep. "It'll take time—one month from now, three weeks after landfall…" The duvet rustled as he draped it over both of them.

But we'll get there.

Will nodded. After a long exhale through his nose, he tilted his head and lifted his right arm to cradle Hannibal's head. His fingers idly caressed those silky locks.

"…gotta try the wine," Will breathed, already forgetting the pain. "Five grand…?"

"Yes."

"And a mai tai?" Eyes closed, the corner of Will's mouth perked. "…on a white sandy beach?"

He felt Hannibal smirk.

"Whatever you'd like."

And so it was, Will realized, while documenting each exquisite detail in the gorgeous glittering waters, that they had indeed emptied Pandora's Box.

Buried deep within and nearly smothered from all the despair and calamities, Hannibal had insisted on salvaging this final, meager gift.

Hope.

He lived for the present, yet he knew the importance of destinations.

Stay focused.

This was why the beach house had taken several weeks to acquire.

Keep going.

And why, while it was still winter, he had set their wedding date for a distant midsummer night.

Neither out of necessity.

It's worth it.

It was all to extend the journey.

Against time and its ephemeral nature.

You'll see…

An all-encompassing shadow brought reprieve to his seething skin. Will glanced up at the large umbrella. Hands on his hips and a sheen of sweat on his brow, Hannibal observed his work. Will grinned at the endearing simplicity.

There was no grandiosity.

Just a white and blue striped umbrella over two plain beach towels and a picnic basket. But Hannibal had meticulously positioned their cover so that the progression of the sun would continue to offer the optimal amount of shade.

Satisfied, Hannibal set his sights on the ocean and stopped ahead of Will. Then he turned and offered his hand.

Will took it with a smirk but gasped when he was abruptly yanked to his feet. Hannibal's iron grip on his hand didn't relent as he raced to the sea and then flung Will into the shallows.

Saltwater burst around him in a violent spray. Now doused in the pleasantly lukewarm water, Will thrashed in his attempt to right himself and, feeling that trademark sprig of zest, launched himself at Hannibal, effectively knocking the air from him and, for a split second, ridding him of that infuriating grin.

Swathed by the gentle current and rush of bubbles, they sank into the turquoise blue in this playful embrace, baring teeth in their laughing smiles.

It was after their swim and before their lunch when Hannibal dropped the "bell" question. They had closed the umbrella to allow the blazing sun to dry their bodies. With a sigh, Will sat up from his beach towel and molded back his damp hair.

"Of course I've heard of it," he answered. "Who hasn't?"

"Yet are you aware of the origin?"

While mulling over Hannibal's angle, Will leaned his arms on his bent knees while gazing into the featureless horizon. He massaged the stubble on his chin. "Well, between boxing and taphophobia……"

Hannibal smirked as he remained lying on his stomach, arms folded beneath his head. "Correct. Boxing is understood as the idiom's true origin. However, I've been pondering its association with the latter as of late."

Will, with all his allure for the macabre, was of course very familiar with the topic—a fear that echoed on from its heyday in the Victorian age.

Premature burial.

"—which is also the title of a short tale by the esteemed writer, Edgar Allen Poe," Hannibal remarked as he heaved himself upright and opened the umbrella.

Tearing his eyes away from the brand, Will huffed. "Sounds familiar."

"Do you not find such a mechanism fascinating?" he asked, seating himself on his towel. "A patented fail-safe comprised of an above-ground bell affixed to the supposed-deceased's wrist."

"A foolish hope."

"But a hope, nonetheless."

Will furrowed his brow at this blatant optimism. And before those words of inquiry could even leave his mouth, Hannibal answered him.

"Escape, whether by air or sea, is not feasible." He paused, as if hesitating. "Not with our lives."

Staring deadpan at the infinite horizon, Will blinked. The entirety of the past few days now replayed under this new light. Abruptly, he realized he'd been "taken out to pasture." There was no such thing as truly carefree in their world, yet that didn't stop Hannibal from gifting Will these "ignorance is bliss" moments.

An irrefutable compassion.

And Hannibal had been careful to hide his sorrow deep beneath that suit of armor.

"Way to bury the lead," Will muttered. "However—" He turned toward Hannibal while his eyes remained on the sand. "If you don't want every last remaining shrivel of our happiness to be tainted with suspicion, I suggest you leave the danger in plain sight. *Tell* me."

Yet the moment those words left his mouth, Will felt that shameful sting of hypocrisy.

And irony.

Yet Hannibal merely smiled. "Very well."

Will dipped his chin and smirked. "You suggesting we die, Dr. Lecter?" Then, with a sassy quirk of his brow, he glanced up to face Hannibal. "Free ourselves from this mortal coil?"

"Without death, we'd be at a loss," Hannibal reminded with a spark in his eyes.

"The prospect of death that drives us to greatness," Will recalled.

That night still fresh in their minds, of bloodied knuckles and an offering on his table, Hannibal nodded. "Yes."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Will chuckled. “Just give it to me straight.”

Hannibal’s mouth parted a second before he spoke. “I’ve been pondering classic literature as of late.”

“So you really have memorized every book on those shelves.”

Hannibal nodded once. “Every page, every punctuation.”

Will smirked and somewhat straightened his posture. “Alright, try me.”

Hannibal eyed him. “Feed you a line?”

“Sure.”

“Then I’m afraid there’s not much to ‘try,’” Hannibal said, reflecting that smile. “A child could guess this one.”

Will scoffed. “Somehow I doubt that.”

Quiet, Hannibal cast his gaze to the sand. Then he took a breath and recited:

“The roses in thy lips and cheeks shall fade…”

He closed his eyes.

“To paly ashes, thy eyes' windows fall…”

Crossing through his office, small book in hand, Hannibal stopped in front of Will, who was perched on the desk’s edge.

“Like death, when he shuts up the day of life,” Hannibal read.

With a huff, Will lifted both eyebrows at him. Hannibal was right. The answer had come easy to him, though the meter was a dead giveaway. Yet certainly no “normal” kids were guessing this one.

“Sounds weak to you,” Will quipped. “But I suppose we *are* star-crossed.”

“Yet here’s the best part,” Hannibal added, barely containing his excitement. His eyes returned to the page. “Each part, deprived of supple government…

“Shall, stiff and stark and cold…” He closed the book with one hand. “Appear like death.”

Will crossed his arms. “*Like* death?” Then with a scoff, he shook his head. “There’s no way…”

Yet there it was—that irritatingly endearing smile, accented by crow’s feet. “Did I not tell you that incompetence and complacency can turn the tide of any battle?”

As the water rhythmically tumbled across the shoreline, Hannibal drew a shallow glass container from the picnic basket. He removed the cover, pulled out a square plate, and placed it upside down over the opening. Then he upturned both, removed the container, and handed Will the sandwich.

Will took it and glanced down at the pretentious display.

A fucking egg salad sandwich.

He stared at the flawless diagonal cut through perfectly toasted sourdough. Then he picked up a slice. The amount was just right—not overflowing but not too skimpy.

And when he bit into it, he froze.

Though he had mentally prepared, he was still thrown by the exquisitely delectable assortment of flavors—creamy, medium boiled eggs, homemade mayo, mustard, dill, chives, smoked paprika, crisp lettuce…

And he couldn't help but think how far they've come since that day.

That fragile first meal somewhere in Maine.

As he chewed, Will wrinkled his brow against that sting of emotion. Knowing Hannibal's praise-hungry eyes were boring into him, Will kept his focus downcast as he swallowed. "So, what? You just gonna…induce a *coma*?"

That omniscient smirk never leaving his face, Hannibal remarked, "Even better." He took a bite from his own serving and took his time eating, tormenting Will with the mild suspense. Then with dark fervor in his shadowed gaze, he met Will's eyes, and said:

"Catalepsy."

The clang of the steel hatch rings off the yellow tiles and lingers in their ears.

The white sheet slips off his face as he swings his legs over and his bare feet hit the floor. Dark circles stark against his pallid face and matted hair, his haunting eyes lock onto them.

Then, unblinking, he limps toward them, dragging his left ankle behind him in an erratic zombie gait.

Closer.

Closer—

At the river's edge, Alana's mercenaries had stormed the swarm of bounty hunters, which escalated to a frenzy when it was announced over loudspeaker that the reward was null and void.

Apparently, the targets had fulfilled the conditions themselves.

Severely outnumbered against the mob, they executed a smash-and-grab operation. Zeller was also whisked into the helicopter. Although buckled into the seat, he clung to it for dear life while staring out the open door and then at the two bodies lying, with only darkness as their shroud, in the back like cargo.

An eternity of ten minutes later, they landed at a small, dark airport, which was more accurately a handful of unmanned runways.

Illuminated by landing lights, a twin turboprop plane awaited at the end of one. A second helicopter sat idle on the third runway. Along the taxiway between were several people pushing a man on a stretcher.

Jack.

In opting for mobility, he had chosen a Level IIIa vest. As confirmed by Miriam, it came as no surprise that Hannibal had known to use the highest caliber he could find.

The bullet was lodged somewhere inside his chest.

Perhaps if he had died instantly, there would be a sense of closure. After Bella's passing, so too broke his final thread to humanity. They never again went out to the occasional employee dinner or even gifted each other wine during the holidays. Not unlike Will, the draw to Hannibal only worsened while the cannibal was out of sight.

Despite all his efforts, it pained Zeller to see his former boss spiral like this. Jack had been suffering for a long time, his obsession festering in its slow consumption. Yet here he was, still clinging to life.

And having devoted his own life's work to processing abrupt, senseless deaths, Zeller couldn't stop himself from meddling.

And so, with an expertise of anatomy and countless post-mortems to his name, he joined the two medics at the front of the plane while two body bags were loaded into the back.

By the time they landed in Florida, where Miriam accompanied Jack into the awaiting ambulance, it was two hours since their assumed time of death. Zeller never let them out of his sight. Still covered in Jack's blood, he followed them, now strapped to stretchers, into a private jet. There, they rested on opposite sides of the aisle.

After washing up as best he could with the plane's tiny sink, his first opportunity to check occurred at hour five. Before liftoff, another FBI division stormed in to assert authority. After much arguing, they finally allowed him to look under the guise of making a positive ID. So with a roll of his eyes, Zeller pulled on some gloves and unzipped each bag to the first strap across their chests.

Aside from the splotchy pallor, rigor mortis was indeed present in their tranquil faces. Their jaws, slightly agape, were frozen in place. As eerie as it was to stare down at these two, they had textbook death masks.

Not acting.

Without asking, he unbuckled the strap and opened Hannibal's body bag to the midpoint.

The officials rose up in protest but faltered at the revelation.

Under normal conditions, facial muscles would lock up first within several hours of death. Yet when Zeller tried to articulate Hannibal's slightly raised arm, it was like moving a statue. Despite a fair amount of force, the joints remained locked in time.

Cadaveric spasm.

—from an abrupt death, fraught with emotion.

He crossed over to Will. His joints were still moveable but not without difficulty.

The rapid onset of rigor mortis was often caused by intense exercise right before death.

It was common.

Algor mortis was a steady, gradual decline. Their slight warmth to the touch was normal—*expected*.

Under these circumstances, only a fool would think to check for a pulse, just as a trainee would proclaim that a scene is safe.

And so, he hadn't.

Neither did the other agents on the plane, nor the autopsy assistants he later sent away…

Eighteen hours had been their chance.

A rare gift.

Zeller faints.

Will steps over his fallen body and scalpel without so much as a glance. Jimmy's back crashes against another table. It rattles along with his quaking.

Like the apex predator he is, Will studies him. Beneath his blank eyes and matted locks, he's somewhat impressed with the show of resilience, staring Death directly in the eyes.

But then Jimmy's focus flicks downward.

—and *then* he faints.

Will limps past him. His eyes rapidly scan the ashen corpse on the table.

No incisions.

Smirking, Will places his hand to the side of Hannibal's face and, as the tale foretold, leans down to place a gentle kiss to his parted mouth.

As Will pulls away, he sees Hannibal's eyes flicker open. Only halfway, yet his hazy irises find Will and a soft smile soon follows. His upper lip perks, revealing a bit of fang. Then, voice low and raspy—as it often is at the break of dawn—he says:

"Hello…*gorgeous*."

Will chuckles, thumb absentmindedly caressing Hannibal's cheekbone. "Mornin', sleeping beauty."

Amused, Hannibal subtly furrows his brow. "Are we no longer referencing Snow White?"

Will scoffs. "You? The *fairest* one of all?" He laughs. "More like the fucking *pettiest*." He straightens and holds out his hand.

Hannibal takes it and, with a wince, Will pulls him upright. Smoothing down his bed head, Hannibal peers at Will's left foot, noting the moderate swelling and purple welt around the ankle. "It's fractured."

Will nods, lifting it a bit higher and bracing his hand on the table for balance. "Figured… How's yours?"

"A non-issue. Merely overstrained." Careful to avoid the shattered test tube, Hannibal hops to the ground while Will eyes him skeptically.

Aside from the sluggish blood needing to re-reach the cannibal's brain, he can tell by the way Hannibal freezes that the pain has caught him off-guard.

"Fortunately, I suspect a hairline fracture," he says as if there wasn't just a pregnant pause between them.

Will lifts an eyebrow. "Yours?"

"No, yours."

With a sigh, Will glances down at his unconscious former colleagues.

Time of the utmost essence, Hannibal snips the cable from the unplugged bone saw and ties Zeller and Price's wrists to the pipe beneath one of the sinks.

It took a lot of persuading to stop Hannibal from snapping their necks.

Especially Zeller's.

But Will met that stubborn persistence beat-for-beat until, finally, the killing machine relented. The compromise was that they'd be stealing Zeller's car, and that seemed to satisfy

Hannibal somewhat.

The petulance.

Will looked on at their sorry state and sighed. With luck, perhaps this would *finally* convince one of these two idiots to confess.

After fetching their wedding rings from the evidence bags, he discovered a closet of spare scrubs—V-neck tops and matching pants. Fortunately, the color was navy blue and far less conspicuous than the usual turquoise, magenta, or baby blue. They had to take Zeller and Price's shoes, however. Then the scrub caps and masks would complete the disguise.

Will tenses as Hannibal delicately eases the loosened shoe onto his left foot.

As the numbing coldness fades and the drug continues to metabolize from his bloodstream, Will feels the consequences of his sacrifice vengefully catch up with him. His posture sags as that ache intensifies and radiates throughout his entire battered body.

Hannibal looks up at him while gently tying the laces. "Stay with me, Will."

He musters a tired scoff. "I am…"

"You can rest in the car."

Eyes closed, he huffs. "Like old times?"

How soothing were the steady windshield wipers and patter of rain.

Hannibal had glanced over and switched off the radio.

Fifteen hours from Baltimore.

Three hours from Bloomington.

Countless stolen glances later.

Careful to keep most of the weight off his own right foot, Hannibal stands and meets Will's distant stare with a wistful smile. "I did tell you we would rise again, did I not?"

"*Thankfully*, not from ashes," Will quips. "I'm surprised they didn't just toss us straight into the oven." He chuckles dryly. "Either way, I feel like *Hell*."

"Nothing a spot of morphine can't fix," Hannibal assures with a smirk before hooking Will's right arm around the back of his neck. With his left arm, Hannibal cradles Will's flank and hugs him to his side.

For good measure, they had also slipped several scalpels into their pockets.

Then, Hannibal looks to him and asks, "Shall we?"

They pull the surgical masks over their mouths and noses.

Side-eyeing this glimpse into the good doctor's past, Will smirks beneath his own mask.

From across the room, Zeller wakes with a start. Muffled by a scrub cap tied around his mouth, he can only watch as the two zombies push through the double doors and disappear into the guarded hallway.

Hungering for human flesh.

Chapter End Notes

And that's how Will became a believer of life after death.

……and that love wasn't only true in fairy tales.

Time Waits for No One

Chapter Notes

▶ Click here for additional warnings:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

According to certain lines of thought, it's a cardinal sin to ask, "What's for dinner?"

Not only does it spoil the surprise, but it implies distrust. If the chefs wanted to disclose, they would have.

Tonight, however, they were feeling generous.

And so, with a quirked eyebrow and a vicious, sneering smirk, one graciously answered:

"Meat's back on the menu."

Steam wafts from the glazed entree and all its glory. The delicate wisps split around sharp ti leaves and fade into the warm air. Permeating every corner of the room is the braising scent of slow-cooked pig and its savory symphony of spices.

The inedible garnishes are admittedly makeshift yet still betray the artist's recent influences —roses alongside grocery store mangoes, dragonfruit, and split bleeding pomegranates—all glistening in the candlelight. A platter of freshly shucked oysters border the behemoth main course.

There's enough for a banquet. Yet on this extravagantly adorned dining table exist only three additional place settings.

At one, the head of the table, sits the guest of honor. Dressed in a dazzling black gown, she awaits with labored breaths and delicate hands folded upon her lap.

"Half"-lap.

Neither do her eyes ever leave that pretentious, braising column of meat.

Hers.

She takes a sharp breath to quell the surge of visceral disgust at the back of her throat. But breathing in the fumes of her cooked flesh, no matter how reminiscent of kalua pork, does

little to settle her revolting stomach. So, she swallows back the rising bile and her eyes flick down to the gleaming oyster fork on her plate.

Without a single cogent thought in her drug-addled brain, she watches, as an outsider, as her fingers pinch the thin handle and tuck it under the table. She then slips it beneath a fold in her dress until not a hint of silver peeks through.

No sooner has she done this do her hosts arrive, at last rid of their aprons.

And damn, do they clean up well.

Especially for two washed-up guys who had been declared DOA not long ago.

Her memories return as random blips spliced with static—of repeatedly refreshing TattleCrime, downing champagne, a doorbell chime, stumbling, and opening it only to come face-to-face with two bloody nurses requesting to borrow her shower.

Now here they are in suits.

No doubt they had helped dress each other.

She makes a mental note to change the sheets, if she ever again gets the chance.

And bleach the shower, and the bathtub…

Of course, Hannibal is the one to waltz in first. There's an obvious pep in his step as he does so, dressed to the nines in a three-piece suit.

Odd.

Gazing at that pretentious, graph-paper pattern, it occurs to her that something about that particular look seems familiar. But she chocks it up to her imagination.

"You've been a most patient host, Bedelia," he says, with more vigor than anyone has any right to be, considering their past 24 hours.

She blinks.

Utterly lost in time, she thinks, surely, it can't be more than a day.

Then, like a splash of ice water, it strikes her that this is *not* her dining room. Eyes wide and flicking around, she takes in the oddly shaped interior, with its faceted walls and warmer hue of wallpaper.

Mounted to her right on a rich wooden accent is an insultingly innocuous painting of pink blossoms on a branch.

Hannibal takes a moment to scan the dining table before walking to the far end to pick up the chair. "A shame our third guest couldn't be here."

As he places it at the empty space to her left, Bedelia rolls her eyes at the thought. She doesn't have the faintest clue why she had agreed to invite *him* over.

Then it hits her.

Therapy.

How fortunate that he bailed on that evening's appointment.

Did he know…?

She slowly blinks and stares at the hazy mess of swimming vision and thoughts. It's only when the ripples settle does she again have a coherent thought.

No, of course he didn't.

Speaking of know-it-alls, she cranes her neck in search of that righteous, reckless, twitchy little *bitch*.

"You *really* couldn't have made my job any easier," he says with almost a drawl. The words subtly drag their feet while leaving the skewed tilt of his lopsided grin. "But Frederick showing up would've been *too* good…"

As Bedelia watches him fiddle with the garnishes, it finally occurs to her that she's not the only one here who's as high as a kite. Dimly, she observes the perfectly fitted suit and white open-collar dress shirt that no doubt Hannibal had picked out for him, just as he had done in Italy while procuring a bone saw, parsley, and thyme.

Will's hair was also lovingly styled, with one stray curl grazing the scar on his forehead. For all his cruelty, Hannibal has always had that doting side to him. Whether it's washing her hair or his husband's, he can't resist indulging in that tender control whenever the chance arises. Will, on the other hand, is really no different. Like his counterpart, he would only ever allow it as a "rare gift" or, as is now, when he has the excuse of inebriation to blunt his inhibitions.

Bedelia scoffs.

Even now, she can't resist psychoanalyzing them.

"Two birds, one stone," she quips, albeit very belatedly.

For Will to accept painkillers of this strength, he must be in fairly dire straits. And she can't deny the vindictive sense of glee this knowledge gives her.

So, while grazing the two-pronged fork beneath her dress, she watches that injured bluebird flit about in the grass.

Just out of reach.

"Shall I carve?" Orange dances along the knife's edge. So too do specks of embers gleam from the Devil's shadowed eyes.

“Please,” Will breathlessly answers for her. With a loud sigh, he settles in the chair to Bedelia’s left.

She internally curses her continual bad luck. Unconfident with the aim of her non-dominant hand, especially in her current state, a chill of uncertainty descends upon her. But she quickly pushes it away.

No use dwelling.

Although subdued behind a mask of refinement, Hannibal revels in slipping the blade into the tender meat.

And she flinches.

There’s a sting in the empty air past her bandage.

As her thigh flakes off the pale femur, she notices Will lean back in his chair and, very intentionally, extend his sore left leg.

She scowls. No doubt teasing him of his injury led to their choice of cut. In fact, she’s now certain that Will had made the final call.

But she eyes Hannibal’s throat as he leans in close to set down her plate. For a split second only, she indulges in the impossible fantasy of catching him off-guard, basking in the spurting shower of arterial blood and the permanent death of Will’s smile.

If only…

“I assume your love of oysters never diminished since we last dined together,” Hannibal says with a grin. Three thin slices sit fanned out and framed by a half-circle of inedible garnishes —feathers, flowers, the works. At least there aren’t any skulls or half-mandibles this time. He pours a line of red sauce which dribbles down the shallow “steps.”

“I suppose you’ll see,” she answers huskily, a strained smile wrinkling one side of her face. Had she known they’d be visiting, she would have gladly downed a slow-acting poison or, better yet, infected herself with some incurable, contagious disease. It probably would’ve done her good to look up what irreparably spoiled the flesh. But she simply never got around to it.

Additionally, it was lights out before enough cortisol could ruin her flavor.

Somewhere smothered beneath her fog of clamoring regrets, the two continue to wax their poetic, sardonic drivel—something about eating a fair share of oysters themselves and wishing they could’ve dug a real pit for a more authentic taste. As Hannibal moves away to begin carving out a generous slice for Will, her mind snaps back to her final gambit and idly traces out the trajectory to Will’s throat.

It should be too far. Yet with a few blinks, she realizes they had shifted their place settings toward her third of the table.

Or have they always been there?

It's difficult to tell with the walls languidly warping around her. Perhaps they simply wanted a better view of each other over the spires of ti leaves and candlesticks.

Hannibal returns his attention to carving his own portion while Will fiddles with his wine glass of water, lamenting its contents.

It's then that she sees the "window."

The moment they take their first bite, they'll notice the missing fork. They'll see that she hasn't at all touched her beloved appetizer.

Hannibal seats himself and pulls in his chair.

With a sickening spark of gloating in their eyes, they raise their glasses of water as a customary toast. Bedelia plucks the stem of hers and takes a gulp without partaking, though they don't seem to mind.

While appearing to shift her posture, she slips her left fingers beneath the fold of black fabric. From her peripherals, she watches Will pick up his silverware and cut out a small wedge.

Hannibal mirrors him by a three-second delay. In doing so, they naturally drop their focus to their plates.

So her fingers grasp the thin handle.

If they're talking, she doesn't know. Noise drowned out by the thunder in her ears, she dares flick her eyes toward Will as he skewers what's rightfully hers.

Time slows to a crawl. She watches him lift the piece to his mouth.

The second it crosses his lips, Bedelia snaps forth her arm.

The spear whips down her line of sight.

"Mo-o-om?"

Molly jolted awake. Blinking, she realized she was still seated at her desk and, with a scowl, found her right elbow leaning on the keyboard. The screen was filled with a wall of 6's.

"Wha-at?" she automatically called back. Squinting through the fatigue, she hit undo and noticed how her page count dropped by 39.

Her eyes flicked to the time in the lower right corner.

Only 8 o'clock.

While running both hands down her face, she paused upon noticing that Wally hadn't answered.

With a sigh, she heaved herself from her swivel chair and out the room. At the same time, Wally stepped into the hallway ahead of her. She grinned approvingly at his change of pajamas and hoped he had already brushed his teeth.

Wally glanced about and briskly walked toward her.

Concern struck her. But as she studied those shifty eyes, he strangely seemed more irked than afraid.

"Uh…" Wally glanced over his shoulder. Eyebrows furrowed, he looked back at her. "Um, Mom?"

She smirked. "What? Spider?"

Wally fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. Then he glared back at his open bedroom door and asked:

"Didn't you say Dad was *dead?*"

Molly froze.

Sympathy hit her like a tidal wave, and she softened her voice. "Oh, Wally, he was never your—"

"—'cuz he just climbed through my window."

The words hung in the still air.

Molly grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him into the study.

"*Ow!*" he complained as she released him and scrambled for her desk.

She yanked open the top right drawer and slid open the shallow tab at the very back. In the next second, she was racking the slide of a gun.

Wally stared. "Um, Mom—"

"Lock the door and call 911," she ordered under her breath while slipping a second magazine into her jeans pocket.

But he merely watched her exit the room and close the door behind her.

Gun braced in front of her, just as she was now trained, she crept toward the warm light spilling into the hallway.

A part of her already knew it was all for naught. Whether that "part" was the sane or irrational one, she didn't know.

Yet she pressed on. Step by step, she closed in on the optimal angle. Then just beyond the door jamb, she caught a blur of mottled red and brown.

A wagging, tawny tail.

It flailed a mile-a-minute as Winston greeted and whined at that traitorous, disheveled trespasser.

Long lost.

"I missed you too," he murmured, incessantly ruffling the long fur on Winston's neck and knowing the exact spot to scratch. Winston's front paws were braced on the dark fabric of Will's shirt—*scrubs*—as he stood to lick that chuckling face.

And perhaps clean off the flecks of blood too.

It went without saying that Molly had lowered her gun by this point. And not once did he give the slightest acknowledgement of her presence.

All of it screamed "*rude*," yet she was stunned to feel an illogical sense of affection, like bumping into an old friend after years of radio silence.

Seems it had decided to pay her a visit, after all.

Forgiveness.

"You've got a lot of nerve," she said.

And finally, there was a sign of life.

Molly watched as his smile incrementally faded to a shadow of its former self. Yet his eyes never strayed from that which meant most to him. All the while, her focus subconsciously shifted to that foreign silver ring on his left finger.

"…had to cut it off," he finally said.

Molly's gaze returned to his face.

Winston decided to crane his neck around. Mouth open and "smiling," he looked at her with his tongue hanging out the side.

"Guess that's poetic," she muttered. "You were stuck with me." She glanced away at Wally's belongings—his messy open closet and various toys scattered among dog toys on the floor. "Like an *ill-fitting* ring."

Will's petting slowed to a stop, and Winston took that signal to scamper to his beloved human. Sensing the pressure bearing down on her shoulders, Winston nuzzled his head

beneath her free hand. Molly gratefully scratched behind his ears.

At last, those avoidant gray eyes flicked up to meet hers. “I would have stayed—”

“I just wanted to *mourn* you,” she snapped and then quelled her tone. “…and fancy you’re in some ‘better’ place.” The corner of her mouth twitched into a dry smirk. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Noting the gold was also absent from her ring finger, Will watched her stroke Winston’s head.

A silence befell them.

Ugly, stifling, yet resoundingly out of place.

As she had known for months now, there was simply no fire left to her scorn—not even the faintest ember. Yet the prospect of this truly being their final encounter weighed heavily on her.

Speak now or forever hold your peace.

And God knows she had made her peace—with this and more—long ago. But the question slipped from her mouth anyway. It was naive and frankly humiliating, yet that putrid doubt had a way of resurfacing whenever she saw their names in the headlines.

Even for gossip.

She had to look at that carnage, no matter how upsetting the sight.

Yet the moment she gathered enough air, he stole that notion right from her throat.

“Are you—”

“*Yes*,” he said.

Then with a twitching, sneering, almost resentful grin, he opened and closed his mouth several times, scoffed, and resolutely—perhaps even bashfully—kept his eyes to the floor.

And admitted:

“……I’m in love with him.”

The silence was interrupted by the steady thumping of Winston’s tail while he sat staring at Will.

Like an applause.

Molly smirked. “I know…” Blinking at the sting in her eyes, she sighed, irritated at herself, and glanced away. “But they say such terrible things, sometimes.”

“Then let this dispel your doubts, once and for all.” After a pause, the corner of his mouth perked. “Your doubts about us.”

While still kneeling, Will closed his eyes. It was then that Molly observed how tired he was. Barely hanging on by a thread, he swayed ever so slightly.

She exhaled slowly. “When the time comes, and your luck well and *truly* runs out…” She swallowed. “And all those grisly photos emerge…”

“Then it’s as it should be.” Will chewed the inside of his lip before opening his eyes and looking up at her.

Holding his gaze, she nodded. “Sometimes I feel crazy for hoping you just…disappeared. I know that day will come. I think a part of me will always believe that you somehow made it, that you’re relaxing somewhere…”

“And not alone?” he asked, voice soft.

With glassy eyes, Molly nodded. “*Never again*,” she whispered. Then a scoff escaped her. “I often wonder why I even care. And then it hits me.”

Her eyes trailed to Wally’s cluttered nightstand. She walked over and picked up the small black frame that was buried behind the various action figures, stuffed animals, and fidget toys.

“No matter how acutely you may try to empathize, you’ll never truly understand until all *this*…”

She used her thumb to wipe the layer of dust from the glass. Then she placed it in the modest space she had made for it on the nightstand.

“…happens to you,” she said.

Dressed in his scarlet jersey, white pants coated in red dirt, her other half beamed at the clueless toddler in his arms.

Will wisely remained silent. She had known, while they were dating, that he had sought her as a bandaid to patch the two chasms that had been ripped through him.

One for a partner.

The other, a child.

Along with the contents of his baggage and the vivid truth behind his scars, he had hidden his dissatisfaction well. He liked the ease of mundanity, tinkering with something as lifeless and predictable as a boat motor, and waking up every morning next to a loving wife.

Only “liked.”

He had always laughed a little too hard at her jokes.

She had been surprised at how quickly Wally had warmed up to him. It was only while lying alone in the ICU, kept awake by a horrid ache in her shoulder, that she understood why.

Two months after their first meeting, “Dad” permanently replaced “Will” in Wally’s vocabulary. Will smiled awkwardly when it happened.

Two years later, his eyes still flicked away at the title. Each and every time, Wally’s never did. He watched and took note.

It had always been tolerance, she realized in the painful clarity of hindsight.

And Wally delighted in little else than testing that tolerance.

Not my family.

Molly took a sharp breath. “Where is he.”

“He’s not here,” Will lied.

Badly.

Molly stared at him, unblinking. The gun was still idly in hand, though she knew that it had no influence in the matter.

Regardless, it took all of five seconds for Will to break eye contact. Finally, after much fidgeting, he confessed:

“He’s outside.”

Hannibal was indeed outside.

Wearing Zeller’s tattered fleece jacket, which he had found while lying low in the backseat, over the expanse of dark stains on his scrubs, he stood in the driveway.

Yet he was far from alone.

Nor was he empty-handed, much to everyone’s ravenous delight.

About twenty minutes into Will’s turn to drive, Hannibal had been perplexed when the car abruptly swerved and came to a stop at what must’ve been a curb.

“Wait here,” Will had muttered, followed by the opening, closing, and beeping lock of the car door.

So, while reclined across the backseats, Hannibal had stared blankly at the ceiling while he waited.

Abandonment requires expectation, echoed almost snidely from some palace corridor.

Just when he endeavored to get up, the car unlocked and the driver side door opened.

But the relief was cut short.

Along with the raucous crunch of paper, Hannibal was hit with an overwhelmingly offensive whiff of minced beef, ketchup, mustard, relish, and oozing grease.

He sat up and glared at the proffered, detestable, sorry excuse for food.

A *hotdog*.

Will met that mutilate-*then*-kill stare with tired, half-lidded eyes. "You rather have *McDonald's*?" And when Hannibal didn't respond, he sighed. "At least these are homemade. All-natural."

With a twitching sneer, Hannibal begrudgingly took the heart attack on a bun.

He held out as long as he could until that haunting, bottomless pit in his stomach spurned him to feed.

"Dog food" is what he had deemed this fodder.

But apparently, Will had thought the same.

So, with stilted movements, Hannibal cast bits of their extra hotdogs into the sea of fur and wagging tails. Their jaws audibly snapped at the falling morsels, but at least they kept their paws on the ground.

Well-trained.

It had been such an odd sight to see Will's complete shift in personality. As they pulled into the driveway, reflective, glowing eyes had watched, curious and wary, from the darkened windows. With a sigh, Will stepped out. Then the Jack Russell-like one poked his head out the doggy door, scented the air, and led the charge.

Arms wide, Will dropped to his knees and greeted them with the widest beaming smile, activating rare wrinkles on the far sides of his face, now semi-taut by his scar. The pitch of his voice also went up by an octave and a half.

A few newcomers sniffed Hannibal's bloody pants and shoes, but the old pack loyally stuck to their former leader. After affectionately greeting each one, Will lifted his head.

That conjoined ache hit Hannibal's heart before the awareness did. The next second, he too found his eyes instinctively scouring the sea of fur for that flowing, auburn coat.

While most of the dogs kept their gleeful focus on Will, the one referred to as “Buster” placed his front paws on Will’s bent knee. He turned his snout to a darkened window and barked.

They looked in time to see the middle blinds snap shut.

Having been fast asleep just moments before, Winston pawed at the closed bedroom door, eager to join in on the commotion.

In a panic, Wally backed away from the window and hurried to Winston’s side. “No, no, shh —!”

But a low growl rumbled through bared teeth at the looming shadow beyond the blinds.

Arms wrapped around Winston, Wally could only stare in silence as the figure raised his hand to knock twice. After a pause, he reached into his pocket and pressed something small to the window.

With a snap, a burst of glass cascaded to the floor.

Then a breeze rattled the blinds.

Winston quieted.

The next second, his tail repeatedly thumped against the door.

With a resigned sigh, Wally lowered his head and released him.

“Why did you move?”

“Why do you *think*?”

Will’s eyes flicked about the spacious room. “It’s a nice place.”

“Yeah, roomy, gated, secluded…” Then she scowled. “Did you *kill* the guard?!”

“He’s in the trunk,” Will answered and after a pause, added, “—alive.”

Molly put a hand to her forehead. “We’ll have to move after this…”

He looked at her. “Why—?”

“Because you’ve just doxxed us, *that’s why*.” With a heavy sigh, she brushed back the frayed strands from her loose bun. “You won’t believe the lengths some paparazzi will go.”

Will furrowed his brow. “Freddie?”

“No, not her, surprisingly.” Molly smirked. “If you can believe it, there are far sleazier ones out there.”

Will quieted and, to Molly’s amusement, appeared deep in thought. Then he looked her in the eyes and asked, completely serious, “Names?”

Molly smiled faintly. “You need to leave.”

Will dipped his chin to break that unbearable eye contact. When Winston trotted over to him, he gently placed both hands on the sides of that tilted head.

He lowered his voice. “Does he have any friends?”

“We’ve moved *twice* since you left.” She paused. “Soon to be third.”

Will slowly blinked. “…Always the new boy at school?”

“Always the stranger,” she murmured. “Because of all the secondhand fame, ironically. No one seems keen on getting caught up in the crosshairs. Wonder why…”

In the ensuing silence, she gazed at the indented dog bed that had been pulled as close as possible to the foot of Wally’s bed. “At first I chocked it up to my own wishful projecting. But it’s true. This one reads emotions well, no matter how many forts Wally tries to put up.”

“Pure empathy…” escaped Will’s mouth as he stroked across those floppy ears.

I look at your dogs and see the best of you, Alana had once told him through her eyes alone. All the while, those said dogs romped through the snow and rejoiced in his return.

Will’s hands stilled.

“*Winston*.”

Winston, whose focus had strayed to the window, immediately turned toward Will.

He stared into those wise, yet innocent, brown eyes.

Then, with a long exhale, he lowered his hands.

“Find Wally.”

Hannibal had somehow never made the connection to his own animalistic traits until he too found himself with his nose slightly to the air.

Citrus shampoo and bubblegum toothpaste.

Bright, artificial sweetness.

Something a child would select.

The corner of his mouth perked for a half-second. “Hello,” he said. After casting the last bit of the hotdog into the mass of snapping jaws, he dried his hands on a napkin and turned.

What he saw gave him pause.

Not related, he had to confirm with his palace office file. And upon closer inspection, it was true. There were undeniable differences in those rounder, developing features.

But they were subtle.

It didn’t take a stretch of the imagination to envision another such boy who once followed his father around boatyards.

From across the driveway’s width, Walter glared back with the same defensive ferocity and resting distrust. The difference lied in his unerring boldness right from the start.

Sustained eye contact.

The boy only broke it to glance warily at the house.

Cautious, yes. But unlike the one who’d been fated to become their slain dragon, this was *not* a shy boy.

“Hannibal Lecter,” he stated knowingly.

The one-and-only dipped his chin. “Yes.”

Walter fidgeted with the hem of his cotton jacket, which he had quickly thrown over his pajamas.

After much blinking, he finally gathered enough air behind his larynx and voiced, with the slightest waver, his innermost curiosity:

“…How many people have you *killed*?”

To that, Hannibal grinned.

Not my family, and yet for the first time since setting foot in the Hobbs’ blood-soaked kitchen, he genuinely fancied the thought.

Hannibal took a few slow steps forward. With each pace, he was pleased to see Walter defiantly hold his ground—not unlike how their daughter once did—though only just.

So, with a smile that held merely a fraction more affection than it did malice, Hannibal answered:

“Many more than your father.”

“*Hannibal*.”

A pity Will wouldn’t approve.

Hannibal glanced down at Winston pushing his way in front of Walter and shepherding the boy away.

As Will limped over to Hannibal, he regarded his beloved with a warm yet wistful smile beneath that scalding disapproval.

Perhaps it was for the best.

It is.

Hannibal turned to face the other, more even set of approaching footsteps.

When she stopped ahead of him, her eyes scanned him up and down.

Judgement.

"*Mister* Lecter, I presume?"

Hannibal smirked for a millisecond.

"Miss Foster," he greeted.

She nodded. "They ought to revoke your Ph.D. too."

Hannibal eyed her from the shadow of his brow. While Will was fully preoccupied with the dogs, Hannibal took the opportunity to counter, "You desire me stripped of my title, yet what of the world where I detected your husband's cancer?"

After a split-second pause, a strained smile graced half her face. "Nothing could have saved him. Not unlike someone else I know…" Pointedly holding his gaze, she added, "And someone *you* once knew."

Hannibal took a sharp breath. "Is it not selfish to forbid your son from playing baseball? Or discourage him from studying forensics?"

Unfazed, Molly raised her eyebrows. "Was it not *selfish* to cut your daughter's *jugular*—"

"Carotid."

"*Hanni*—" Just as Will shoved his way into the line of fire, the slam of the front door turned all of their heads.

With his arms full, Walter had closed the door with his foot and began staggering his way down the driveway. Winston trotted after him and half of the pack scampered over as well.

They investigated the garment bag.

The breath caught in Molly's throat, which was the final confirmation they needed.

With such a vivid, vast memory palace at their disposal, materialism had little meaning in their lives. Everything they cherished was lovingly hoarded and stowed in whatever place

they could make for themselves in the mnemonics of their minds.

Where their limits lie remained yet to be seen.

But as proven by their indulgent construction of countless rooms, it wasn't "space" that would be their boundary.

It's "*time*."

Before you and after you…

Last one left turns off the lights.

Walter unzipped the garment bag. He held it up for a few seconds—during which several dogs stuck their snouts in to thoroughly whiff the prized contents—and then set it on the hood of Zeller's car.

Mouth agape, Will glanced at Molly. "How'd you—"

Then from the garment bag's outer pocket, Walter drew a lighter and a can of hairspray.

Right index finger braced on the nozzle, his left thumb clicked on the lighter. The delicate flame wobbled in the night air and illuminated the crimson crosses.

And Hannibal could only grin.

"*Parley,"* said the cunning boy.

Lines of water drip off the table's edge. Two candles have fallen and extinguished in the growing puddle.

The table having lurched, so too did it shift all the perfectly parallel silverware.

Yet at the center of this chaos is a quiet stillness.

Distended veins and tendons run down a ruthless grip. So fast was his reaction, he had torn completely from his person suit and emerged a feral animal.

A predator.

Nothing but the endless abyss lurks beneath those ruffled bangs and within those shadowed, dilated eyes.

With raised hackles and exposed fangs, he stands, frozen at the peak of his lunge.

It's not apparent from the opposite pair of downcast eyes and languid chewing, but deep-seated compassion has struck first.

And so, for Hannibal's sake, Will meets that vicious gaze and lets reverence read plainly from the depths of his soul. It manifests as the faintest perk of his lips.

Death's silver forked tongue hovers scarcely an inch from the delicate skin of his throat. His Adam's apple shifts as he swallows that first bite.

Locked in time as well, Bedelia can only watch, still with her left arm mostly extended. And although her horror thoroughly amuses Will, he prioritizes his husband by gifting him a soft huff and subtle nod of his head.

It's alright.

With a shudder, Hannibal blinks.

Upon meeting Will's, color seems to return to his eyes—the edges of his pupils—and the tension in his right hand begins to ease. Those taut tendons gradually melt into the smooth plane of his skin. As his grip on her wrist loosens, the oyster fork slips from her fingers and reveals that she released it long ago.

As Hannibal sinks back into his chair and the tatters of his person suit, silver hits the edge of the table and clatters loudly on the floor.

Bedelia's left arm and posture has retracted as well, yet her empty hand still hovers over the table and her untouched plate.

All the while, Will indulges in another bite. The thin savory slice practically melts in his mouth, so he only chews twice before swallowing. Then he swaps his butter knife for his wine glass of water.

"That was quite impulsive," Will finally says before taking a sip.

From across the ruined table, Hannibal sits rigidly and briefly closes his eyes. He seals his lips with a tight swallow. Then he molds back his hair and gets to work tidying his space.

Will scoffs.

So fussy…

"They say most vehicular accidents occur close to home," he adds while helping himself to another bite. "Anecdotally, I found that to be true. I saw five major crashes during my time on the force. Four turned out to be within a mile of their homes." His eyes flick to Bedelia's, which remain glued to her plate. "One fatal."

"Only one…" she mutters, barely audible.

"Just wasn't written in the stars," Will dryly commiserates between bites. He cleans his plate in record time and washes it down with the last of his water. In a more refined manner, Hannibal finishes moments later. Will watches him gracefully clean his mouth with his cloth napkin.

Bedelia's mumbling interrupts his ogling. "Summer Triangle..."

"Indeed," Hannibal at last says, rather dismissively. He sips his remaining water, though most of it had spilled in the chaos. "In addition to Altair and Vega is the lesser known star Deneb."

"Floundering in the river," Will remarks.

Hannibal smirks at him. "Far downstream."

Bedelia continues to stare ahead with half-lidded eyes. "…Is that who I am?"

"I dunno," Will answers, matter of fact. He wipes his hands and sets aside his napkin. "We have plenty of contenders for third wheel, don't we?"

"So it seems," Hannibal agrees.

Will reaches over and takes one of the oysters. "In fact," he begins, eyes on Bedelia and brow slightly raised, "I recall you deeming yourself Bluebeard's wife." For a split second, the corner of his mouth perks as he watches her eyes widen. "Regrettably not the last."

Hannibal looks on with amused intrigue. "Did she really now?"

Will swallows and sets down the empty shell. "Oh, yes."

Hannibal licks his lips. "My intent was to ultimately spare you, Dr. Du Maurier." He drops his eyes to the carving knife resting alongside the massive column of meat. "However, I take great offense to the attempted murder of my husband."

"Oh, *you're* one to talk," Will gripes with a smirk, stealing the words right from her throat.

"As are you," Hannibal counters with a smile. "But I've taken what I've promised. Now it's your turn."

Will quirks his brow. "*My* turn?"

Hannibal nods, and in his eyes is not a hint of sadism, arrogance, or malice—only simple exhaustion after a *very* long day.

There's no love lost for his former doctor and fallback.

Only business.

And Will can't deny how much that pleases him.

"Murder or mercy?" asks Hannibal.

Movements twitchy and mouth somewhat parted, Bedelia slowly turns to look at Will.

Reclined in his chair, Will rests his forearm on the table and his fingers idly drum the surface. Focus back on Hannibal, Will shows a bit of teeth in his lopsided grin.

He takes this long moment to gloat.

All the while, he can see from his peripherals how Bedelia's horror devolves to wrathful hatred by the second.

So, he swipes his tongue across his lips, delights in how Hannibal's eyes instinctively track it, and says, "Think I'd like to try cooking with clay."

And as Bedelia gasps and grips the remainder of her lap, he adds:

"…But not today."

Hannibal smiles.

"You…" Bedelia opens and shuts her mouth several times. "*You—!"*

"You've been a most *delightful* host, Bedelia," Will says while stiffly rising from his chair. "At least *I* was thoroughly entertained, unlike my husband." He pushes in his empty chair. "And as an old friend of ours once said, society needs a few *psychopaths* to keep us on our toes."

"Is that how you see yourselves?" she practically hisses as Hannibal likewise departs from the table. "A pestilence to weed out the weak?"

"While we've given up good and evil, I'd say we have far more agency than mere disease." Will swipes a slice of mango as he passes by and relishes in the succulent taste—the simple things. "You need awareness to be capable of ethics."

Bedelia gawks at her nearly-room-temperature leg and bandaged stub. "*Ethics?"*

"Free-range rude," Hannibal clarifies with a smirk and sprig of whimsy in his darkened eyes. He places a gentle palm on the back of Will's shoulder as they head for the door.

Bedelia abruptly braces both hands on the table. "Wait—" She kicks out with her right leg and barely catches herself on Will's chair. "*How dare you just—*!" The drugs still coursing through her veins, she strains to heave herself upright. She wants nothing more than to collapse and resign to this nightmare. But the threat of abandonment spurs her to ask. "What day is it? *Where am I?!"*

Several steps in, Will stops at the threshold. Ever vigilant of his husband's fragile recovery, Hannibal halts alongside him.

Will releases a long sigh through his nose and then glances over his shoulder.

She stares wide-eyed at those half-lidded eyes beneath that maddening, cocked eyebrow.

"*Arrivederci*," he tells her.

And with the faintest smile seeping through the badassery of that unmatched, sassy stoicism…

He remarks:

"There's *always* room for seconds."

Two days earlier

"We've one last goodbye," were his parting words to Molly.

Of course, it wasn't in regard to themselves but to the answer of her question:

"Where are you going?"

In Molly's car, they departed from that gated community.

Minus any dogs and plus a suit.

It had been a wise tactic, getting Hannibal to side against him.

That pig never did sell it.

From the get-go, he had received offers from high-rollers who were keen on outbidding the other. Then one of them went silent when his yacht was hijacked.

The enthusiasm further withered when the bodies continued to drop. Lounds' pay-walled, uncensored photos left little to the imagination. The July 1st massacre proved that bounty hunters weren't the only ones on the menu, and the horrific staging of the escapee's corpse was the final nail in the coffin.

Disposing of it would undoubtedly incur their wrath. And so, in utter desperation, the pig resorted to cutting his losses and listed it for free.

And *still*, there were no takers.

Then one day, he received a direct message from the one who would become his fearless savior.

Freddie Lounds.

Her motivations were simple.

In addition to capitalizing on clout with a pretty pose beside the suit, she genuinely did want it returned to its rightful owner.

…as well as avoid being paid a visit herself.

And like a stray dog, it had to go to someone gracious enough to care for it.

"*No*."

Freddie stopped the closing door with the width of her boot.

Molly sighed.

"He loves this thing as much as a man could ever love a suit."

"Exactly."

"Believe me, you've already won his respect. Now it's your turn to strike a bargain." With the utmost confidence, Freddie beamed in the silence. "I'm the only one who's unscathed for a reason, Ms. Foster.

"Trust me."

Will didn't say goodbye to Winston when they left, not that he had truly intended to uproot him from stability and family. But he couldn't deny it was tempting.

Fortunately, utter exhaustion did well to blunt his sentimentality.

The revelation that Molly had adopted his recipes and fully divorced herself from processed dog food was the final reassurance he needed.

And admittedly, it did warm his numb heart to see the lengths Wally would go for his beloved best friend.

The final thing Will could do for them was to solemnly make his vow:

"We won't call on you again."

And so, while on their way to Bedelia's, they watched as a near endless stream of police cars charged by in the opposite direction.

Before they left, and after all the dogs had been secured in the house, Will had Molly discharge her pistol several times. That in combination with the broken window and stolen suit would effectively seal the deal on that narrative.

But he did look back, through the rearview mirror only, as he pulled out of the driveway. Molly had already turned away to step back into the house. But having crept outside from the garage were the silhouettes against the warm glow of the floodlight—a dark-haired boy and his auburn dog.

Safely together, they watched him go.

And once they disappeared around the bend, Will at last brushed the layer of dust from that tarnished doorknob—now shockingly lower than what he remembered—and opened the stuck hinges.

From down the dirt road, a snoozing dog perked his head at the sound and began wagging his tail.

Will lowered to a crouch. With a smile, he patted his knees.

C'mere, Winston.

From the threshold, Hannibal's shadow blanketed the tearful reunion. His left fingertips were perched on the rotting wood, holding it open, and he dared not step in.

Yet he watched.

And in his right palm, over the scar, was the key.

Present

From the dead of night descends the source of the five hour delay.

The baggage handler can't help but snap a few vertical photos while the parade of police and FBI march onto the tarmac. He watches a sniffer dog eagerly lead the way up the conveyer belt and into the cargo hold.

Along the interior's rails are rows of freight. Pallets of boxes and crates are tightly enclosed by netting and reach the ceiling. It's a full flight, to say the least, and the dog handler strains to see beyond the first three rows of pallets.

The gaps along the rounded walls are too narrow to squeeze through, yet they're no problem for the three-year-old spotted pointer-mix. Already pulling at the leash, she darts in the second he unhooks the clasp.

As she disappears from view, he listens to her scrabble across the boxes and metal flooring.

She barks.

"Hey!" The handler starts forth but gets wedged in the first gap. He backs out and waves to the agents. Reaching for their guns, they hurry up the ramp.

Then all goes quiet.

The handler draws his pistol. "Heidi!"

“Standby,” one of the agents mutters into the radio.

“Heidi, here!” he continues to call.

As police rapidly gather outside, he suddenly hears repeated scraping. Then a snout emerges from beyond the crate.

Heidi squeezes out of the gap. Her handler leans down to check for wounds. Instead, he notices her mouth opening and closing.

Eating.

“Hey! Drop!” he scolds. But it’s too late. Whatever it is vanishes down her throat, though he gets a faint whiff of peanut butter.

With a sigh and while averting his eyes from the searing burn of judgment, he reattaches the leash and leads her outside. Holstering their weapons, the agents gripe and grumble while filing from the cargo hold.

“All clear,” one transmits over the frequency.

Their footsteps stomp down the ramp. Then a loud whirring starts up and ceases with the locking of the door.

The lights shut off, and pitch black engulfs the area.

It’s only when he hears the final latch shut that a man, wearing a yellow reflective jacket, black cargo pants, and steel-toed boots, crumples up the wax wrapper that once held Molly’s homemade dog treat. Seated in a narrow pocket at the furthest end of the cargo hold, he clicks on his headlamp and struggles to his feet.

Too tired and sore to put any grace behind it, he loosens the two nylon straps and shoves aside the large cardboard cover. In the shallow wooden air-tray is a glossy, cherry casket.

He senses the airplane’s pushback commence and wastes no time undoing the latch and lifting up the front lid.

Hands clasped and lying perfectly on his back, his vampire—stark, tragic, and comfortably donned in a lined coat and wool sweater—rests within.

Rolling his eyes, Will whisks off his headlamp and dims the LED to its lowest setting. He then weaves the elastic headband into the nearby mountain of cargo netting. The faint, moon-like glow fills the cramped space.

But as he shrugs off the stiff safety jacket, he freezes at the sudden warmth engulfing his shoulders.

Hannibal has draped his coat around him.

He firmly links his wrists over Will's stomach, careful to avoid his ribs. With an exhale, Will closes his eyes as Hannibal presses his mouth to his neck, nuzzling the nape.

And this time, Will subtly leans back.

Without hesitation and despite the bruising from the river's surface.

Hannibal pauses over that pulsing carotid artery.

Racing.

Each precious beat gently pushes against his lips.

Feeling a tad self-conscious, Will smirks. "Do you not find it dreadful? The suspense?"

He feels Hannibal grin. "*Comparatively*?"

Will huffs and rests the back of his head on Hannibal's shoulder. He tries to deepen his breaths to temper the dull, rebounding pain and purge that persistent anxiety. "All about that perspective, huh?"

"Only *you* can bring me to my knees," Hannibal murmurs, voice husky and frayed at the edges. His right hand idly caresses just beneath the "smile," though he increases pressure with his words.

To Will, it reminds him of being palpated at the doctor's. Through the layers of clothing, skin, muscle, and fat, Hannibal paints a vivid picture of those precious organs, so comforted by what he finds. He sees through touch their robust, continued function.

And digestion of Bedelia.

Will chuckles.

Since their departure from the morgue, Hannibal has been incessant in his fussing and constant examining. Bedelia's attempt on his life only reinvigorated his efforts.

And, wholeheartedly and profoundly aware of how much it means to his husband, not once did Will complain or pull away.

But Hannibal is quietly running himself ragged by fretting like this. It's only natural that Will has made it his priority to return the favor.

So, while the engines whine and roar to life, he places his hand over Hannibal's and, through the quiet of their minds, he tells him.

I'm here.

It's alright…

At cruise altitude, Will offers his arm and, just as he once did at a modest dinette table, Hannibal administers their last dose of morphine.

“Your hands are cold,” Will notes while the sensation of fingertips linger on his skin after Hannibal releases him. The lined coat is still draped over Will’s shoulders.

Yet Hannibal merely smiles at him while capping the used needle, and Will knows better than to waste his own breath.

The cargo hold is pressurized, but the climate control is hardly activated. With only unfeeling objects to cater to, the temperature is merely enough to prevent the shipments from freezing over.

Seven degrees Celsius, his research suggested.

Seven hours to go.

Fortunately, the rightful owner was a well-built fellow in life.

And death.

Conceding defeat against his stubborn fight with fatigue, Will closes his eyes while still sitting upright. “I need to lie down.”

“Go ahead.” Hannibal intently keeps his eyes on the open casket.

Used.

…yet soft, plush, and the pillow appears to have a generous amount of stuffing.

Could be worse.

Always.

Will shrugs off the stiff safety jacket and long coat from his shoulders. Then he steps in and, with a grunt, settles onto his back in the casket.

It definitely could be worse.

Hands clasped over his middle, he lets his eyelids drop and releases a heavy sigh. After a long, selfish moment of relishing this space, he rolls to his side.

There’s just enough room for one more.

Hannibal follows suit, and Will is glad to be spared the act of asking him.

It’s inelegant when he manages to wedge himself in. Eyes now open and half-lidded, Will stares blankly at the white inner lining of the casket’s wall. Meals will be sparse and irregular over the next few days.

But it’s undeniable that they had eaten well in Cuba.

“Never feel shame for nourishing yourself,” Hannibal murmurs, dipping his chin as if bracing against the storm. The warm air of his words brush across the curled hair at the base of Will’s skull. “Indulgence affords us the luxury to fast.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Will mutters, resigning to this latest predicament and closing his heavy eyelids. He shifts to relieve pressure from the dull ache of his ribs and sharply bent elbows.

Hannibal reaches for the coat Will had cast aside and pulls it up to their chins. Mindful to avoid his chest, his left arm drapes across Will’s stomach.

Will continues to stare into the casket wall. The top of his forehead scarcely grazes the soft lining.

The white noise fades into the background.

An endless torrent across metal wings.

And pine needles cast across rippling fabric.

A low rumble.

Of waves bursting on ice.

And *her*.

Rising from the sparkling mist.

“Life is precious.”

Hannibal opens his eyes at those words.

Will doesn’t need to see his face to know.

As the silence persists, so too does the tension in Hannibal’s hand. Yet Will merely waits him out.

Like they have all the time in the world.

Finally, Hannibal dips his chin and says beneath a fleeting breath:

“Lest we forget…”

Will blinks at the blank canvas. Close to his eyes, the weave of threads blur into smoothness. “Was it nice to see her?”

“It *was* nice.”

Will exhales slowly. “…among other things?”

Even from the distance, he saw the smile she gifted her long lost brother.

A triumph of imagination.

You knew where to look for me…

A hole in the floor of the mind.

With a sigh, Will tries to shift again, yet it's all in vain. And so, the discomfort persists.

An ache.

Which he knows is worse for Hannibal, particularly his right arm.

Yet the man stubbornly remains, and the cold continues to descend.

"She liked the flower," Will says after a long moment.

"She *did*…" Hannibal's voice trails off with the closing of his throat. His fingers have curled into the fabric over Will's stomach. Will felt those words as sharp spikes of air on the back of his neck.

And only when those muscles ease, from exhaustion and acceptance alike, escapes the question:

"What flowers would you like?"

After a split second pause, Will lurches up with a start. With enough force to tear from Hannibal's grasp, he twists around and grips Hannibal by the collar.

He surges down and their mouths crash together.

Hannibal's hands immediately clamp down on Will's wrists, but he releases them to desperately push against Will's shoulders. Yet Will responds by pulling Hannibal closer, and in the struggle, Hannibal's legs thump as they kick out and brace against the walls of the casket. Anything to get away.

Yet none of it out of rejection.

Stop.

Only compassion.

Will…

Mercy.

You're hurt—

"Good," Will snaps in a split second break for air.

In fact, "hurt" was an understatement.

As they were in the freezing sand and then the muddy riverbank, Will's entire body rests across Hannibal's. Along with the unrelenting pressure, each accidental bump against his ribs is like a needle piercing through the numb shield of morphine. Ruthless, it drives deep into his skin and muscle, causing him to flinch and sporadically wince and gasp into Hannibal's mouth.

Such is the reality of having several fractured ribs.

Hannibal melts to stillness beneath him. His legs straighten, and he gently lowers his hands to Will's back—as he's been longing to do since the waterfall—and runs his searing fingers down the river's bruises.

And *God*, does Will love it.

Feeling alive.

Aching for *him*.

Will breaks away to scoff, and he grasps Hannibal's head, fingers gripping his hair, to kiss his neck.

Eyes closed and head pulled back, Hannibal sighs at the sensation—the exhilarating rush of baring his throat.

Novel.

Would you regret it…?

As that question returns to haunt him once more, a new sting causes Will to falter.

That bone-deep pain compounds until, finally, it paralyzes him.

Echoing from the depths is the sound of the sunset's waves softly tumbling across the shore.

Eyes soft, Hannibal maneuvers his hands to the sides of Will's shoulders. With great care, he holds him steady and eases Will onto his side.

Will's eyes remain downcast as they lie face-to-face.

But as Hannibal releases him, Will grasps both hands and clutches them beneath his chin.

They're cold.

"You'd rather *freeze* to death than fucking *ask* for help?" Will snaps, breaths hot across the frigid skin. He then drapes his leg over Hannibal's and hooks his ankle behind Hannibal's calf, effectively locking them together.

Their foreheads barely an inch apart, Hannibal grins. "…than cause you pain," is his weak excuse.

The corner of Will's mouth twitches. Their lips still glisten under the dim glow of the headlamp.

Hannibal's half-lidded eyes flick down to the forceful clasping of their hands. Inevitably, he dips his chin to close the gap between their foreheads. "I've long grown accustomed to my prayers falling on deaf ears," he says, relishing how they share each other's breaths.

Feeling the warmth gradually build between them, Will smirks. "Never knew you were a praying man."

"I've always been loath to beg. The last time was nearly a lifetime ago." Eyes closed, he takes a deep breath through his nose, and Will feels the expand of those ribs against his knuckles. "Why ask when no one is listening?"

"*Well, I heard you*," Will cuts in. And that pang of emotion courses through both of them.

He knows full well that Hannibal hadn't begged.

With the utmost love and compassion…

He had let him go.

With a huff, Will glances up to kiss his hurting beloved on the cheek.

This time, the touch is delicate.

Sweet and light.

Scarcely a brush of lips on skin.

Yet in the wake of this simple touch is the greatest devastation.

Smiling, Will returns to resting his forehead against Hannibal's and scoffs. "It's just as I told you…"

He feels Hannibal subtly nod.

Then those charming crow's feet deepen with his smile. And Hannibal asks, via the quiet of their minds as the torrent continues to batter the metal walls:

Then what did your disembodied spirit hear?

A question.

Or two.

Hannibal closes his eyes over the worsening distortion.

Your answer?

From pitch darkness, red-white curtains gently billow, unhindered.

Beyond is a sea of clouds, its rolling cotton waves a dazzling white.

Ice as fine as dust.

Above stretches the inky sky—the shallows of the horizon as blue as the ocean's depths, its peak the pitiless absorption of light.

A perfect canvas for the smokey rift, with brushed wisps of light and fire, spilling infinitely.

Here, together, they lie—intertwined and entangled—on the gray chaise lounge. Swept across the floorboards is a dusting of shattered glass, shards like scattered snow and sparkling as the stars above.

The thin air of the stratosphere whistles softly in their ears.

And so was Will's answer.

What did you see?

This.

Was it beautiful?

……what do you *think?*

Hannibal chuckles.

And as the tears well and threaten to spill from his deep-set eyes, that soft laughter evolves into desperate anguish.

Quaking in silence, Hannibal weeps. He tries to turn in ever closer.

Seeking. Searching.

For warmth, company, reassurance…

Memento mori.

Will's thumb passes over that reminder.

Platinum.

Ouroboros.

Here to stay.

Yet the metronome ticks on, evermore.

It will never be enough.

Never.

So, Will releases one of Hannibal's hands to tenderly rest his palm on the side of Hannibal's head, fingers cradling the base of his skull and thumb brushing his sideburn.

With great patience, he waits for Hannibal to meet his eyes.

Brown and blue.

Then, Will takes a breath.

And *finally*…

Finally.

He dispels, once and for all, that festering regret.

…and tells him.

"I love you."

Hannibal's mouth parts. Those gorgeous, wholly empathizing eyes widen ever so slightly—pupils dilated and infinite as the abyss.

And he accepts this rarest gift of all.

A redo.

With precious breath, his tongue shapes the forbidden words before they even leave his mouth. Frail and dusty from disuse, they threaten to stumble, rather timidly, from quivering lips.

And how he's longed to say it, though he never dared hope.

It's then that the ticking ceases.

Complete silence in the stillness of the clock.

In this singular rift in space, the future sinks its fangs deep into the fleeing past.

With its capture, halts the turn of the axis.

And the march of the stars.

Yet perhaps, Hannibal thinks, as he reaches up to hold the side of Will's head. His fingers nestle into the curled locks. The heel of his hand grazes the stubbled jaw.

His thumb traces the beautiful scar.

And he loses himself in the fathomless, knowing blue.

And sees.

In the leftmost window shines Altair.

Perhaps…

Perfectly framed on the right is Vega.

Perhaps, just once more.

He says.

“Aš tave myliu.”

Mano mylimasis.

“Aš tave labai myliu.”

Chapter End Notes

And that's how they finally got around to saying it (and properly this time!).

"I love you."

My beloved.

"I love you so much."

It Takes Two… (Epilogue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chilton breathed a sigh of relief when the airplane finally took off.

And when it landed, and when he departed the airport, and when he arrived at the hotel…

To think Alana had been so adamant that he stayed.

He scoffed.

Specifically, she had been steadfast in her refusal to let him catch a ride on the Verger jet.

“You *re-e-eally* ought to stay put,” she said with an inconceivably flat expression and crossed arms.

But Chilton had planned for this possibility. It was unfathomable as to how she could be so calm at a time like this. Yet it didn’t come as much of a surprise. It was just *like* them to continually downplay the blatant danger, even when Death was staring them in the face.

This time, Chilton endeavored—and he certainly had plenty of time to scheme during his lengthy convalescence—*I’ll be ready.*

He skipped his appointment with Dr. Du Maurier that night. There was no point in calling. If his prior appointment was any indication, which had been delayed by an hour due to a “scheduling mishap,” she likely wouldn’t have been waiting for him anyway.

Cutting her loose was for the best. They say it takes one to know one, and Chilton of all people would know when he was being subject to psychic driving. Still, he liked going for the entertainment value and to puzzle on why she seemed so adamant that he create a person suit.

—*literally* from the skin of his enemies.

But he had no intention of sticking around to find out. After booking the next available first class ticket out of the country, he stepped into the airport with only his passport, wallet, lacquer cane, and the bespoke clothes on his back.

While criminally overpriced, the on-site boutiques had everything he needed. In record time, he acquired a carry-on suitcase filled to the brim with essentials.

Then after fifteen hours, rife with delays and two layovers, he at last arrived in the only safe haven left in this world.

Lithuania.

Anyone who knew a lick about the cannibal—or better yet, read Chilton's *New York Times* Bestseller book—would have known that the ex-psychiatrist was oddly evasive about his childhood abode.

And childhood, in general.

The way Hannibal Lecter would effortlessly dance around that juicy topic was leagues more infuriating than how Will Graham would disassociate during their therapy sessions. It was yet another thing he didn't envy Dr. Du Maurier of.

—*especially* after she was discovered sans a leg and allegedly nibbling on what remained of it.

Chilton winced when he read that grisly TattleCrime article.

But it was the dastardly smile Hannibal had left him with that abruptly returned to haunt him. The fool had refuted his insanity defense just to publicly humiliate him. With the beast trapped like some zoo animal, Chilton had looked forward to the day he'd be handed back the keys. As amusing as it was to see him stripped of all luxuries and standing in empty space, far more punishment was owed to the spawn of Satan.

And knowing Hannibal the Cannibal™, Chilton knew to hit him where it'd hurt most.

Dignity.

But he felt no remorse over dishing out that dirty threat, even after their escape. The target on Chilton had been set long ago.

By him *and* his lover boy.

Speaking of which, Will Graham's miraculous, continued existence—not unlike his own—had certainly thrown a wrench in the works. While the traumatized cannibal would never set foot on these grounds, his lapdog would gladly go on his behalf. Will Graham had apparently done so before, according to some locals who recalled a broody, bearded American running around with his coat collar turned up.

But Chilton correctly determined that the inhuman levels of codependency between them—especially at this point and likely for the foreseeable future—would never allow the pair to be separated for more than half a day.

So, while the threat remained, Chilton deemed it was minimal. Would Hannibal really risk losing his precious Will for the sake of roasting their old pal *Jamón Ibérico*-style? It wasn't impossible, but this geographical safeguard would have to do.

And for one blissfully quiet month, it was.

Barring the short-lived zombie apocalypse hysteria—that was inevitably spurred by their second rising and the discovery of an empty casket in a cargo hold—it truly *was* a blissful month.

When the plane touched down, Hannibal gently shook Will's shoulder to wake him. And upon opening his eyes, Will only had one thing on his mind:

"I'd like to see Florence."

To say that Hannibal was overjoyed was an understatement.

While more or less out of commission, Will knew what he was enabling by handing over the reins like this. Their cargo flight had landed in Spain, and Hannibal found them a quiet, no-questions-asked motel in the countryside.

While perpetually on the run, few things were more comforting than arriving at a decent abode and collapsing into a soft, clean bed. Will primarily spent the subsequent week lying on his side for some much needed rest and recovery. Meanwhile, Hannibal dutifully leapt at the task of playing nurse and, as was *long* overdue…

Planning their honeymoon.

As usual, Will scoffed while chewing his breakfast and lazily eyed his new name on their train tickets to Italy. Hannibal had centered them in a dainty bouquet of toxic yet enchanting flowers. Although Will was on the tail end of his medicated haze, his brain fog did little to thwart that infectious excitement exuding from his husband's ever-refined face.

Hannibal was *giddy*.

Giddy, giddy, giddy as a schoolgirl.

So, as the Spanish, French, and then Italian landscape flew by, they sat across from one another, listened to the rhythmic clack of the train tracks, and enjoyed the view.

Sleeping in bunk-style beds was the most off-putting part of their travels. Will struggled to recall the last time they didn't share a bed. Needless to say, neither slept particularly well during this time.

And neither brought up their separation anxiety either.

But they did share a kiss one night while leaning on the railing of the caboose. And not being shoved overboard made the whole experience a *lot* more pleasant.

However, the significance of their trip didn't fully sink in until Will first stepped into their new flat. Hannibal proudly opened the balcony doors to reveal the iconic skyline of Florence and its cathedral. Meanwhile, Will went to stow his suitcase in the wardrobe and found it already stocked with an array of bespoke clothes. One side was obviously Hannibal's, but on the other…

Will picked up one of the dress shirts. Embroidered on the inner tag was a flowing monogram:

W.G.

And this time, when Will buttoned up that white shirt, gelled back his hair, and joined Hannibal for dinner, there was not a bone saw in sight.

Inevitably, they talked about it that night.

There was no butter or parsley-thyme soup on the menu, but there *was* a rack of sacrificial lamb.

And a lobster bursting from a cantaloupe.

That one *really* should've given him pause the first time around. But his blindness to it proved how severely tunnel-visioned Will had been that night.

"Do you regret it?" Hannibal eventually asked. Fork in hand, he languidly swallowed his last bite.

We could run away now…

Staring at the tiny cage of ribs, Will sighed and set down his wine glass.

"Hard to regret," he said under his breath, "what was never to be."

Hannibal dropped his gaze with a faint, wistful smile. "I suppose not," he murmured before hiding behind a sip of wine.

Will leaned back into his chair. As the chronic pain steadily became an echo of itself, reclining was a luxury he could now afford. He draped an arm over the back and crossed his legs. "But I've always wondered…" he began. "What would we have done?"

"Together?" Hannibal asked a fraction too quickly.

Will massaged his mouth. "You, me…" Then his eyes bored directly into Hannibal's face. "Abigail…"

Hannibal blinked yet kept his focus downcast. Unable to get the words out, he repeatedly drummed his fingers beside his silverware. All the while, Will observed him with as much objectivity as he could muster. He was happy to wait, now that they could.

But some things warranted being sped along with a little prompting. And here, in the safety of their new home, Will decided to make the request.

Look at me.

Hannibal's eyes flicked up on instinct. And he saw, in the depths of that empathy, not anger or hatred.

But a quiet curiosity.

Almost too good to be true, yet there it was.

If only they had *both* known to look.

Eyes soft, Will huffed. "Why don't you humor me?" he asked while popping the last of his lamb into his mouth. "Where would we have gone?"

"Florence, of course." Hannibal continued to drum his fingers. Then he paused. "Well, Paris, first."

It was an amusing notion—Paris, the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre. The choice almost seemed pedestrian in their twisted world.

You would've liked to have shown us?

Why not.

Will nodded, grinning. "And whose souls would we have taken?"

"There was a father and daughter." As was his tone, Hannibal's eyes were analytical and distant. Yet while his focus flicked aimlessly across the table, the slightest smile graced the corner of his lips. "You could've been Dimmond."

Will blinked. Just as he attempted to recall that name, Hannibal did so for him with a violent flash of splitting skin and lines of crimson trickling down three swords.

"Though not in that form," Hannibal added with a fleeting hint of teeth.

Will chuckled. "Why? Did he look like me?" And before Hannibal could confirm what he already knew, that most pressing of questions rudely and abruptly dawned on him:

"Did you *sleep* with him?"

Hannibal immediately parted his mouth.

"…*No*," he said the following second.

Will lifted an eyebrow.

It wasn't a lie, but…

"But you *considered* it," Will accused.

Excuses crashed and piled up at the back of Hannibal's throat. Will could almost hear the metaphorical tires screeching and metal crunching.

With a sigh, Will massaged his temples. Yet as much as his jealous righteousness called for it, he couldn't bring himself to be mad.

It was endearing.

In that oddly pathetic sort of way.

"Perhaps, at one point, I did have a plan," Hannibal said at last. Pensive, he continued to stare at the table. "But as with my old life of solitude, I found that I could no longer fathom it…nor maintain the discipline required."

"You existed on whims."

"Entropy and indulgence." Hannibal sighed, working his jaw. "A purposelessness except for pleasure."

"A vulgar thing."

"Yes."

Will took another sip of wine after swirling it for a bit. "Even in the best case, it's hard to imagine a place for her in this world."

"…if not impossible." Hannibal rubbed his chin with the back of his knuckles, subconsciously grounding himself with the faintest scratch of emerging stubble. "Most societies mandate that children take precedent over the parents. It's heinous to value the life of the partner over that of their child."

Will downed the last of his wine. "And what are we if not *heinous* creatures?" he murmured with a soft, self-derisive smirk.

Yet as he set down his empty glass, Hannibal at last lifted his gaze to lock eyes with Will. "I chose to kill her."

Will met that challenge, steadfast. "—as you chose to save her, spare her, and wrap her up in our fucking mess."

And while that bitter truth departed from his lips, Will's voice waned to scarcely a whisper.

In that moment, an epiphany struck him, resurrected from the abyss. He last thought of it while trapped in the hazy aftermath of his drug-induced coma.

While tracing his smile's stitches through threads of the white bandage.

…and imagining some other world.

They were just alike, after all.

"You still dream of her," Will said.

The immediate silence was as unbearable as the cacophony of their thoughts.

“Yes,” Hannibal finally admitted. After a shorter pause, he took a sharp breath and added, “Not always.”

Yet not rarely.

Will could only nod.

Perhaps it’s long been apparent to their peers, but he could no longer deny that they *both* had exceedingly poor means of dealing with loss.

And what’s to be done about that?

It seemed the first step was the same as what began their dinner conversation—turning to face it.

“What you desire is sweet and easy peace,” Hannibal recited from that distant palace room.

“And I’m not the only one,” Will remarked, crossing his arms. Then, exhaling through his nose, he allowed the years-old bitterness and dread to slip away with his breath.

Shoulders more or less at ease, he glanced at the over-the-top decorations of flowers, feathers, and tiny animal skulls.

Typical.

Just so typical.

And Will couldn’t help but smile at it all. “So, now that we’ve *miraculously* returned to this moment, what is it that you’d like to show me?”

Hannibal showed those crooked teeth in his smile, and accented by the wrinkles near his eyes was all the adoration he could give. “Florence is where I became a man.”

“So, we’re stumbling down the halls of your beginnings.”

“A stroll down memory lane, as they say.”

“Your tryst with Bedelia not enough?” Will asked knowingly. He reached over to refill his empty glass.

Hannibal held out his glass as well. “You could say the company left much to be desired.” As Will replenished it, Hannibal thanked him with a nod and hovered the opening near his nose. “Care to join me?” he asked on the exhale.

Will set aside the decanter and held up his glass in a subtle, celebratory gesture. “Do you *have* to *ask*?”

Hannibal grinned.

It was a tender joy—honest as it was sincere and growing more frequent by the day.

Never taken for granted.

Especially not with the strands of gray that were steadily encroaching and tinging his hair a sandy silver.

“As I said before, if I saw you everyday, forever, Will…of which I have been and fully intend to…I would remember this time.”

“Then how ‘bout a few more times?”

Hannibal smirked. “There’s always room for seconds.”

Will reflected him with a scoff. “I’ll drink to that.”

The chime of thin crystal solidified that pact.

Ringing sweetly into silence, it hailed as yet another checkpoint in their ongoing saga.

In the vastness of their shared palace, there existed an array of dining rooms. Though each had their place, the last supper that perpetuated Hannibal’s Baltimore dining room and Jack bellowing “*Nooo!*” from their old Florentine one weren’t exactly their favorite places to frequent.

So, this new palace dining room would do just nicely.

It was a hybrid of both those times, revived and rewritten.

Forgiven.

With Will steadily on the mend, Hannibal planned their days accordingly—a casual walk, sightseeing, dining out.

It was amazing what a bit of facial hair and unconventional attire could do for those who wished to hide in plain sight.

For some reason, no one seemed keen to scrutinize the gruff pair of men who lurked in sunglasses, tracksuits, and sneakers.

As time continued to heal all wounds, both mental and physical, their activities, in turn, became a bit bolder.

A murder here, a tableau there…

And *many* works of art.

Yet it culminated in what Will could only describe as a “rude” wake-up call several weeks into their stay.

Of course, it was a given that he had married the Devil incarnate.

But it was easy to forget—under that airtight facade of refinement, decorum, and grace—that Hannibal also possessed equal amounts of *dare*devil in himself.

So, at a secluded rendezvous late one evening, Will was startled from his memory palace upkeep by the deafening roar of an engine. It grumbled and gurgled like some hellish beast. Yet as the gangster closed in, Will didn't have to see beneath the jet black helmet to know who was fucking grinning at him from within.

Sheathing his knives, Will watched the man—a black knight clad in an armor of padded leather and ebony boots—kick out the stand and unbuckle the chin strap.

Of course, Hannibal ruffled free his helmet hair with one suggestive shake of his head.

Damn.

Aside from sensing his blood pressure spike, Will genuinely wondered if midlife crises exist among cannibalistic serial killers.

Well, we're only human, after all.

"This isn't a midlife crisis," Hannibal cut in, hanging the helmet on the handlebar. He swung over his leg to dismount the motorcycle and opened a compartment at the front. "It's an invitation."

From it, he drew a matching helmet and jacket.

"Let's go for a ride, Will," Hannibal said in the ensuing silence.

It occurred to Will, that in some other ancient world, said vehicle would be a mighty steed.

And in that light, the sentiment admittedly made a *bit* more sense.

So, Will took the items with a sigh. Hannibal didn't even try to hide his immense satisfaction of seeing Will zip himself up in that perfectly-fitted leather. Despite the protective padding, the jacket complemented—and hugged—his toned form in a rather flattering way.

Then Will pulled on the helmet and was unsurprised to find the straps pre-adjusted for him. With one last smirk, Hannibal secured his own helmet and assumed position at the handlebars.

Feeling that all-too-familiar twinge of self-consciousness, Will braced a hand on Hannibal's shoulder and swung his leg over the back. It quickly occurred to him that there was *no* personal space to be had here.

More or less balanced, Will lowered his hands to the shallow bar beside the seat, though Hannibal stayed put.

"You should hold on."

“I am.”

Hannibal glanced over his shoulder. “*More*.”

With a sigh, Will leaned forward and reached around Hannibal’s middle. He linked his wrists for good measure.

He didn’t need to see Hannibal’s face to know that the little shit was supremely pleased. Victorious, his gallant knight kicked in the stand and charged forth.

And for the next 27 *fucking* minutes, Will clung to him for dear life.

From all their European wardrobes, one particular item had been conspicuously absent.

That charcoal and crimson suit.

Sated by their dining with—and of—their old friend, Hannibal decided to bid this material possession farewell. Holding on would have only increased its risk of falling into undesirable hands.

And so, while on their way to the airport, they made a delivery—or more accurately, a donation—to what would become its final destination.

The Evil Minds Research Museum.

But while suiting up one last time for that fated dinner date, Hannibal had noticed something tucked into the jacket’s inner pocket. He poked his fingers inside and drew an ivory envelope. Brow raised, Hannibal glanced over his shoulder. But Will, in the middle of his drug-induced power nap, was still out cold on the bed.

Free from prying eyes, Hannibal cleanly split the adhesive and drew the glossy paper.

On the back were the handwritten words:

For my dearest Murder Husbands…

Congrats.

♡ F

With a subtle smirk, Hannibal flipped to the front.

It was a photo that hadn’t made its way online, of which he was sure, being the avid follower that he was.

And so, he forgot to breathe while his eyes took in the novel sight.

It was the night of their wedding.

Before the rain had stopped, before Will had locked away all those distracting emotions and sentimentalities…

There he was, singlehandedly holding their shattered pieces together.

On his face, as he cradled his dying love, was a look as if he himself had been dealt the fatal blow. Teeth bared and eyes squeezed shut, he buried his head in the crook of Hannibal's neck, as if bracing against a hail of fire, and allowed his tears to cut paths through the blood.

Here was exquisite beauty on the threshold to death.

…and profound guilt for scaring him so.

Perhaps there existed a world in which Hannibal had died that night. That possibility was a certainty, according to Will.

When all was said and done, that first morning alone would have been the most unbearable.

Hannibal glanced over at his sleeping husband.

The urge to lie beside him became just as irresistible. And Hannibal subsequently concluded that he *could* use a little break. Bedelia's leg wasn't due for another hour, after all.

But the wedding photo wasn't their only gift. True to her shallow exploitative nature, there was no such thing as a free lunch in her world.

So, tucked into the corner of the envelope was a nickel-sized tracking device.

Meant to be noticed.

And meant for the ever-curious Hannibal to intentionally overlook.

He would have, if it weren't for the *third* gift that he noticed was haphazardly sewn into the left shoulder pad. He split the messy, mismatched thread and fished out yet another tracking device from the stuffing.

It was identical to Lounds' one.

But what caught his eye was a single strand of dog hair stuck to the plastic.

Hannibal grinned.

As a crossroad parted before him, only two paths were particularly appealing. So, he simply did as his nature demanded and retrieved a coin.

With it perched on his thumb, he flicked it high into the air and watched it spin. As it descended, he fancied some dramatic convergence of possibilities—a burst of stardust collapsing into an event horizon, bending space, time, and light.

The coin landed in his palm, leaving a faint pressure on his scar. He peered at the timeline they arrived in and nodded.

One tracker was placed back into his suit.

The other stayed on his person.

For safekeeping.

While passing through, Chilton admires the garish interior design of the lobby. Fine details are etched into seemingly every inch.

Baroque, he thinks this style must be.

While his suitcase rumbles behind him, his ebony lacquer cane clicks with each alternate step on the polished floor. On seeing him approach, the front desk clerk quickly dons an amicable smile.

“Labas vakaras,” she greets.

“Hello,” Chilton answers, feeling a tad self-conscious. After many failed attempts, he deemed it was *much* easier to resign himself to his first language, at least for the time being.

The receptionist pauses for a moment. “English?” she asks with hardly an accent.

“Yes.”

She nods and scans her computer screen.

“Mister…” She furrows her brow. “*Klaus*?”

Chilton blinks several times. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Patrick…*Klaus*?”

“Um, no, it’s Fre—” He scowls for a moment before his latest alias finally hits him. “*Frank* Charleston.”

He beams proudly, but the clerk continues to stare at her computer with a frown. Then she waves in her coworker. Chilton does his best to hide his irritation while they hurriedly consult each other. His grasp on Lithuanian is still very much a work in progress, but he can garner from their expressions and tone that there’s been some sort of major hiccup with his reservation.

As the hold-up stretches on, he awkwardly shifts his gaze to the floor. Behind him, he hears the hotel doorman greet their newest arrival.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Charleston. There was a mistake with your room,” the first receptionist says. “It will be fixed soon. Please wait here.”

Chilton turns and walks over to a chair by the fireplace. He reclines into the upholstery with a loud sigh. His mind wants to jump to the worst possible conclusion, and perhaps he should be calling up other hotels. But he mentally swats away that pesky anxiety and instead tries to focus on the fire's soothing warmth and soft crackle. His heavy eyelids flicker shut.

From some fifteen feet away, the next few guests arrive at the front desk.

"Sveiki," a man says.

Apparently, not well enough, since the clerk chuckles and asks, "Are *you* Patrick Klaus?"

A bit embarrassed, the man huffs. "Um, yeah."

"Identification, please."

There's a pause as the man fetches his wallet. On a hunch that these folks have something to do with the delay, Chilton hones in on their conversation.

"Thank you, sir." There's a sound of rapid typing and then a sigh. "I'm very sorry, sir, but there's been a mistake with your reservation. I understand you and your, uh…"

"—*business partner*," he blurts after a split second pause.

Chilton listens with intrigue. The man has a British accent.

"…had booked the adjoining rooms," the clerk continues, "but an error in our system caused us to overbook. Would you be so kind as to allow another guest to stay in the adjacent room?"

Chilton can't help but grin maniacally in the ensuing silence. Obviously, some sort of "business trip" affair is going on here, and he knows for a fact that there is only one bed in each of these rooms. He almost scoffs at the feigned hesitation. They must be trying to save at least a little "face." But surely the hotel staff couldn't care less.

"I suppose…that's…fine," the man answers, almost as if he has a gun to his back. Then he chuckles. "I mean, if the other person doesn't have a place to stay…"

"Thank you so much, Mr. Klaus! We appreciate your understanding." After a bout of rapid typing and clicking, there's a pause as she must be handing over the keycards. "The couch can be convert into a bed. Or we can send up another one—"

"—*No*, thank you," he cuts in, voice low.

Chilton glares at the fireplace. After some obligatory well wishes, he hears the two elopers walk off, and judging by the sound of their shoes, they're both men.

It'll be an interesting few nights. But odds are he'll decide to switch to a different hotel once he finally gets settled in his room.

As for tonight, he desperately needs rest.

“Mr. Charleston!”

With a heavy sigh, Chilton struggles to his feet and departs from his cozy seat by the fireplace.

He feigns shock and gratitude at the good news.

“Well, *that* worked.”

Like the good old days, Will tosses aside his briefcase like how he once did to his messenger bag. Behind him, Hannibal hangs the equivalent of a “do not disturb” sign on the outer doorknob. Then the door closes and the deadbolt clicks into place.

“And here I thought I’d at least *try* to craft a story…” Casting aside his glasses and plain gray suit jacket, Will chuckles and crosses over to close the curtains. “What are the odds, right?”

Yet Hannibal says nothing as he picks up Will’s discarded jacket, smooths out the wrinkles, and neatly hangs it in the closet by his own.

Will watches him from the edges of his vision.

He had expected something would happened once they crossed the border, and Hannibal hadn’t been shy about hinting as much. But nothing could have prepared him for the reality.

It was a semi-gradual change. With each passing town, the growing familiarity of the names and landscape had an inverse effect on Hannibal’s social skills.

He grew quiet, he became “not fond” of eye contact, and his posture appeared perpetually tense, as if he was always holding his breath.

Bracing for impact.

It was now or never, according to Hannibal. And he told Will this not through words, but through empathy alone. Will’s short death in Hannibal’s arms had opened a new chasm in the floor of their palace. At least, it was new to Will, who was startled when he stumbled upon it during a dream.

Curious, he ventured closer.

Flecks of snow wafted from the gaping maw where their dancing skeleton once was. Shattered remnants of the mosaic lined the edges like serrated teeth. From within, he could make out four more jagged layers until nothing was discernible in the opaque darkness.

A fitting gateway to the Hell of old, where the climate of eternal suffering was not that of fire and magma, but of ice and the horrific cold.

Without a sound, Hannibal stopped beside him.

Only here because of Will’s presence, he simply said:

“I need you, Will.”

I need your help.

In time, Hannibal could patch this up himself—fashion an iron grate, board it up, coat it with cement, and replicate their memento mori piece by piece. He could restore it to where the imperfections mimic the original’s centuries of wear. He could take this part of his palace to his grave and devote his remaining days to a life of ease.

And never know true peace.

…and we can’t have that, now can we?

For now, at their temporary pit stop at this hotel, Will pours two glasses of wine. Finished with their light unpacking, Hannibal has seated himself beside the fireplace.

Yes, the fireplace, which was their main draw to this location.

Hannibal nods in thanks as he takes his glass and indulges in analyzing the fragrance. He keeps his eyes on the hypnotic flames.

Will slouches into the chair opposite of him and observes Hannibal over the tilt of his glass. As he swallows, his mind strays to the lingering aftertaste. The delayed bitterness catches him off guard. It isn’t appalling, but he can’t say he’s fond of it.

Glancing across the fireplace, he sees that Hannibal hasn’t formed any opinion on the matter. His distant eyes are only on the steadily encroaching past.

Suddenly, Will tips his head back and gulps the rest of his wine. Hannibal’s gaze at last flicks over to him as Will gags and lurches out of his chair.

He blinks once while watching Will approach.

Blocking his view of the fire, Will leans an elbow on the mantle. “Is there something you *want*?”

The venom in his voice is striking. Yet taking in that gorgeous silhouette outlined with the vibrancy of the setting sun, Hannibal’s eyes soften. “…Is this a distraction?” he finally asks, voice frayed at the edges from disuse.

“They say there’s value to entertainment.” Will unbuttons his cuffs and rolls up his sleeves to a quarter below the elbows. “Hobbies, pastimes…”

“I would agree.”

Will exhales through his nose and returns to leaning on the mantle. One foot is crossed over the other. “Well, the night’s still young.”

Hannibal nods. He averts his eyes in thought. Already, there’s a hint of mild amusement returning to his tired eyes. He knows what Will is itching for, yet he catches that the door has

been left open. “I suppose there exist activities that I’ve had little opportunity to pursue. Certain sports, for example, or perhaps a game of chess.”

Will smirks and leans his temple on his knuckles. “Why *haven’t* we played chess yet?”

Hannibal answers with a delicate smile. “Why, indeed?”

“Well, I’ll leave you to it to carve us a fancy, thematically fitting chess set.” He licks his lips. “But what else? What’s something we can do *now*?”

Hannibal’s smile widens ever so slightly. “Are you feeling restless, Will?”

With a sigh, Will pushes himself off the mantle and paces toward their wine bottle on the coffee table. “I feel like I’ve been doing nothing *but* rest as of late.” He pours himself another glass.

Hannibal swirls his own glass. “You’d like me to choose.”

“I just find it hard to fathom that there exist things that elude *your* expertise.” Will brings his refilled glass to his lips. “Besides fly fishing.” He swallows. “And I’m guessing also football.” He grimaces after a moment. “Remind me not to get this brand anymore.”

Hannibal smirks. “Not all activities intrigue me enough to warrant studying them.” Eyes closed, he breathes in his remaining wine, also preferring the scent over the taste. Then his voice lowers. “And not all activities offer enough chances to perfect them.”

Will eyes him expectantly. “So…?”

“*So.*” Hannibal sighs and, avoiding eye contact, sets down his wine glass. He stays like this for a moment before slowly rising from his chair. He smoothes the wrinkles from his dress shirt and stops several paces in front of Will.

All the while, Will’s eyes never leave Hannibal’s face. His brow somewhat furrows as he takes in what he sees—an insight privy only to him. And as the seconds tick by, he can still hardly believe it. Yet those mirror neurons effortlessly reflect back that baffling, wondrous truth.

Bashful, Hannibal works his jaw while his fingers incessantly fidget by his side. Then, with one more quick sigh, he at last meets Will’s wide eyes and asks:

“Would you like to learn to tango?”

Perhaps it’s ironic that the first step is not a step at all, but an embrace.

“Closer, Will.”

As with all lessons, there exists a degree of trust from pupil to mentor. And despite the numerous instances of close contact, not once while teaching knife throwing or judo did Hannibal press his advantage.

From start to finish, these were *all* real lessons.

So, guided by Hannibal's gentle hand on his back, Will moves in until the front halves of their bodies are touching. He places his left palm on the back of Hannibal's shoulder.

Keeping his elbow relaxed and bent, Hannibal holds his left hand out to the side. Their faces scarcely an inch apart, Will tilts his head to the right and snakes his right fingers across in inside of Hannibal's open hand. Their palms meet—both soft and callused, somehow. They feel each other's shallow breaths.

The intimacy is *goddamn* striking.

"Wait." Abruptly recalling what he's seen in movies, Will furrows his brow. "Why are *you* leading?"

Hannibal vainly suppresses his smirk. "Simply a habit." And after a quick pause, he adds, "Naturally, this is the position I learned and thus am most accustomed to."

Will bites his tongue, yet Hannibal continues.

"But in studying others, I've noticed that a common technique for partners like ourselves is to alternate who leads and follows."

"You mean, they *switch?"*

Hannibal blinks. And after a particularly weighted pause, he asks, "Is that what you'd like?"

Will shows a bit of teeth in his smirk. "It's only fair."

"Relax."

"Would it kill you to slow down?!"

Chilton blinks a good five times in rapid succession. Now in pajamas, he had just stepped out of the shower to finish applying his full-body scar cream.

But even *more* striking than the salacious words seeping through the paper thin wall and adjoining door…

…are those voices.

Eyes wide, Chilton creeps toward the flimsy door. He can already feel his heart rate spike within his ribs. But in abject denial, he leans in, careful not to make a sound, until his ear is flush with the painted wood.

“Stay connected to me. Ease into the motion.”

“Shit. Wait.”

Zero doubt remains in Chilton’s rattled brain. He’d recognize that low, un-pinnable accent anywhere. And now in the absence of a once infallible British accent, it’s clear and wholly unsurprising just *who* is with him.

“Feet together here.”

“Then I cross over?”

“Yes.”

Chilton removes himself from the door. He doesn’t understand what depraved position this must be, but he couldn’t care less as a tidal wave of hesitant hope hits him.

Could it be they don’t *know*?

He furrows his brow—or what remains of it—and thinks surely this must all be a ploy. The bastards have been hunting him every step of the way, simply waiting for the perfect moment to strike. The hotel staff must be in on it. *Of course!* Now here he is, housed next door to his mortal foes and subject to the taunting noise of their vile debauchery.

He rushes to grab a chair and hushes his movements while bracing the back beneath the doorknob. Perhaps he still has a chance. The hinges *are* on *his* side.

Chilton reaches for his phone. But in his panic, it slips from his grasp and clatters onto the floor.

Frozen in the deafening silence, he realizes their muffled voices have stopped.

He picks up his phone anyway and, not even considering the police for a millisecond, frantically scans his contacts.

Jack—convalescing.

Alana—blocked.

Freddie—capitalizing.

Mason—

Frowning, Chilton deletes that number.

But as the adjoining door decidedly remains *un*-kicked in. A blip of hope dares take root in his rattled mind.

Could it be?

Maybe there’s still time, he hopes as the sound of repetitive activity resumes beyond the wall.

And so, with no other choice but to go for it, he does what any self-respecting rabbit would do once meat's back on the menu.

He packs his bags.

Turns out there are many mistakes to be had in the tango.

Much like life.

It started out stilted and hesitant. With tense shoulders and terse breaths, Will set his eyes to their shoes and unconsciously tightened his grip.

"Breathe, Will."

"I'm *focusing."*

Yet with each repeated stride and turn, the frequency of expletives and stepped-on toes became less and less, along with his internal mantra of each maneuver.

Not unlike how a curmudgeonly cannibal once learned to fly fish, associations came quickly. It only took several tries for Will to etch that muscle memory into the floorboards of this newest room.

Only when they managed their first flawless round did it occur to Will what was happening.

Each step was taken with grace, perfectly in sync, and Will realized there came a subtle ecstasy in successfully reading the other's rhythm, matching their shifts in weight. Though it remained a work in progress, he re-learned to control the weakened muscles in his once busted left ankle.

In those fleeting moments of imbalance, Hannibal supported him, held him close, and Will, in turn, trusted him to do so. And what he did expect, though not necessarily appreciated, was the spark of mischief in those deep-set eyes, which preluded a sudden dip or twirl.

Just a little excitement. But there was no hiding Hannibal's wide, devilish grin whenever he managed to elicit a gasp or irritated scoff from his husband.

*"*You little *shit,"* Will hissed with much endearment.

So, during the next twirl, Hannibal's Reckoning came back to bite him when Will wrenched free from his hold and hooked his right arm behind Hannibal's neck. Before the bastard could react, Will grasped Hannibal's right hand with his left.

And oh, how the tables have turned.

Of course, Hannibal knew the motions in theory. Yet in reality, his movements were undeniably choppy—each step delayed by a half-second hesitation, followed by a slight rush to make up the lost time.

Will also adapted to his new role, which he found to be easier, and he cherished Hannibal's bumbling while it lasted.

And when at last they found their rhythm again, Will heard it.

Music.

Lush strings ebb and swell like the tide. A piano signals each crashing wave before gracefully carrying back the tune.

Beneath their synchronized steps shine polished tile—checkered like a chessboard. Above them looms the distant ceiling adorned with sparkling chandeliers. Bordering them tower the rows of gilded windows.

Once upon a time, this was a crowded ballroom in Florence.

Now, just the two of them dance to Hannibal's choice of soundtrack—a classic. At the conclusion of the first verse, they switch once more.

Following Hannibal's lead, Will listens to him murmur. While the room blurs around them, those lilting lyrics meld sweetly into the fiery melody, perfectly in tune:

"Por una cabeza…

"…todas las locuras."

Su boca que besa…

…erases the sadness…

……calms the bitterness.

"Por una cabeza," Will murmurs, joining him.

If you forget me…

"¿Qué importa perderme mil veces la vida?" Hannibal asks.

¿Para qué vivir?

Pivoting around the contact of their bodies, they reunite in a passionate embrace. Their mouths are parted as they stare fiercely and devoutly into each other's eyes, contact as sustained as the final chord.

In the remaining quiet is only the sounds of their catching breaths.

Bellisima…

So beautiful…

Hannibal tells him, solely from the expanse of their shared hall. Written plainly on his face and sharpened crow's feet is a joyous, grateful smile.

Once thought impossible, for the first time since setting foot on these hallowed grounds, he feels free.

Safe.

Basking in this victory, Will nods.

It won't last, he knows.

All the more reason to grasp Hannibal's nape and close the gap.

As he once considered on that moonlit night, Will takes Hannibal's parted mouth in his. Their eyes squeeze shut as Hannibal reaches up to hold the sides of Will's head, as he loves to do while deepening the kiss.

In darkness, they hear waves.

Crashing far below.

But the skies are clear tonight. And when they part for air, Will observes the faint flecks of their stars in Hannibal's watery eyes.

With a fleeting smirk at his sentimental husband, Will decides to return them to that moment.

Clutching Hannibal's shoulder, he leans forward.

He rests his head on Hannibal's chest.

He loses himself to the soothing breaths and the depths of that steady heart.

Will's distant eyes close when Hannibal presses the side of his head to Will's hair and curls his fingers into the back of Will's shirt.

Here they linger, in the aftermath of their dance.

In the ephemeral present.

Here again, despite their destination.

Without blood sacrifice or crippling pain.

And while not endless, as they've long accepted…

It's peace.

Sweet and easy.

Shaking madly, Chilton waits in the cold while frequently checking his six.

Of course, it's mostly fear that's fueling his incessant quaking.

He's bundled himself up in the layers of his double-breasted suit, duster, scarf, and hat. With only a hasty, uneven coat of concealer applied, he flipped up his coat collar for good measure.

As he watches his foggy breaths billow into the night, it occurs to him that it's times like these when he wishes he knew how to smoke. Each swing of the front door causes him to flinch, and each time he glances back, he fully expects to meet his maker.

At last, a taxi turns up the driveway and takes its sweet time pulling up to the roundabout. Chilton waves his cane at the driver and collapses down his suitcase's handle.

He breathes a sigh of relief as the driver greets him and heaves the massive suitcase into the trunk. Chilton practically dives into the back seat and slams the car door shut. Exhaustion hits him like a ton of bricks, and he reclines into the worn leather. His heart remains thundering in his ears, yet he closes his eyes and tries to recall those meditative breathing exercises.

After a moment, however, he opens his eyes.

The car wobbles while the driver struggles to fit the suitcase into the trunk. And so, with each passing second, Chilton feels his anxiety begin to spike once more.

Finally, he hears the trunk close. The driver makes his way to the front and slumps into his seat behind the wheel.

Then he turns the key, and the engine growls and sputters and then…

Nothing.

The driver mutters curses as he tries again. All the while, Chilton sinks deeper into the backseats.

Of course, it's then that the hotel doors open and out step two harbingers of *death*.

In all black coats, suits, shirts, ties, and shoes.

The better to hide the blood.

And to easily pass off as mourners.

Eyes nearly below the bottom of the car window at this point, Chilton watches as they stroll by from roughly ten feet away.

There's no denying it now that he finally has a good look at them.

Both of them are smiling and chatting casually while they wait for their valet.

Chilton furrows his brow. Hannibal now has a streak of silvery blond in the midst of his sandy windswept bangs. And *damn,* does he look good. It isn't fair. He should've aged at least twenty years from all the abuse he's been subject to. Yet here he is, appearing fresh as a daisy and ready to strut down the red carpet.

Just as sickening are the heart-eyes Hannibal is constantly making at Will, who in turn looks descended from royal lineage. That, too, was ridiculous from how unpronounced his facial scars are. Even though barely visible in the dim lighting, he appears to wear them proudly with how his tousled hair is brushed back and his beard is kept perfectly trim.

The hell is their skincare routine like?!

And how no one but Chilton's own internal monologue is screaming bloody murder is beyond him. Surely the entire world must know their faces by now—*even* Will's.

Suddenly, the taxi's engine rumbles to life. Chilton barely manages to stop himself from throwing his hands in the air and cheering. Just as well, since he was about to resort to prayer, which didn't particularly work out well the last time.

He's long accepted that he's been put on this earth just to suffer.

But as the taxi finally pulls away, Chilton can't resist pushing his absolute dogshit luck.

He's doesn't know why he does it. He hadn't even been thinking about it.

Yet he looks back.

Through the rain-spotted window, they stand with their backs to him and facing the arrival of their valet.

Chilton's gaze is to the gentle hand on Will's shoulder when suddenly Hannibal turns his head.

Their eyes meet.

A scream perched on his tongue, Chilton whips to face forward.

But maybe he didn't see. Maybe he doesn't know.

And perhaps doomed by his curiosity, Chilton just *can't* resist looking back a second time.

When he does, he finds that Hannibal has seemingly returned to business as usual. They thank the valet and head toward their car.

Relief crashes over Chilton in waves.

However, just as he's about to release his long-held breath, his taxi turns onto the main road. And as it does, Chilton peers at the hotel from the corner of his one good eye.

…only to see the trademarked cannibal glance over his shoulder.

And wink.

Chapter End Notes

;)

End Notes

Thank you for joining me on this post-fall journey! This started with just wanting to tie up some loose ends and send them on a “little” adventure. Nearly 140K words later, I guess this is what my brain decided to conjure up.

And I already have ideas for one more fic in this series, which I’ll be completing first before posting. (So, it’ll probably be a while.)

Next time on *Wrath on the Lam*…

It’s time for him and Patrick Klaus to conquer Castle Lecter alone.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!